

GO NAKED IN THE WORLD

Major Nick Stratton, home from the war, does not know whether he dreads or longs for reunion with his family. It is an engulfing family, as Greek as black olives, even though Old Pete, Nick's father, came to America as a boy, and it thrives in a rich, warm, trammelling community of other Greeks. Mr Chamales is very good at presenting these people. The ramifications of their lives, and their distinct, spicy characters, are fascinating to read about. He is also very good at presenting Nick himself, and the problems which come to a man when experience has taught him to look at life with new eyes.

Nick cannot settle down as Old Pete had hoped. He has to undertake much experiment, fierce rebellion and a love affair of violent intensity before he knows where he stands and finds a serenity which comes from his own inner resources, rather than from conformity with society.

This is an impressive novel, packed with people and incident and throbbing with feeling.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Never so Few

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Tom Chamales

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

THE author wishes to extend his gratitude to the following people who suffered through and put up with the throes of the author's second book hysteria:

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*The artist and the man, inseparable,
respectfully and affectionately dedi-
cates this book to his wife Helen.*

Chapter One

THE smell of scorched earth and black powder smoke and the sounds of the artillery and diving planes lay dormant within him, separated by a month and two continents. Now there was only the unceasing sound of the train. Out the roomette window the gentle sloping hills of Pennsylvania were richly green, fertile in the late spring.

As far as his eyes could see the hills rolled and dipped and seemed to reach up to the early morning sun. Vast and endless, they seemed to speak for all the land. For a moment their sight filled him with a nameless joy, then despair returned again. For in the three longshort years of his absence he had become a stranger to his land. And he was going home.

Yet somehow he knew now was not the time to be going home. There was a restlessness in him: a repudiation for the roots that he had inherited in favour of those that he had formed for himself.

He had felt the sudden repudiation first the last time he was in the hospital, after the pain of the operations, while his body mended. He had gone over his life step by step, street by street. In the going back he found that he was moving forward; finally approaching the edge of something concrete, meaningful.

Then they had told him he was going home. At first he had objected vehemently. He knew his family would never understand; to go would be to compromise himself. And then thinking about them, going over all they had been to each other, he knew he would have to go.

A broad-shouldered slim-hipped young man a little under six feet tall, he stood up. He fingered his slightly flattened twice busted nose, then looking into the mirror ran one finger gently over the four-inch scar along his left cheek.

Each mark on your body, he said to himself, is like a chapter out of your life. In each there has been a lesson. How many more until the book was finished? And when? Were

these scars all that was the final testament of man?

To his side Major Nick Stratton heard the door open. 'Good morning, Nick,' Boomer said.

He turned around. 'Boomer the Woomer,' he grinned. 'We'll be in Pittsburgh in two hours. How do you feel?'

'I got buttercups,' Boomer said, 'in the belly. What are you doing? Admiring yourself?'

Nick turned back to the mirror. 'Christ, I look thirty,' he said.

'You look thirty-five,' Captain Woomer said. 'Not a day under thirty-five. The train's full of broads. *Real* American broads. For two cents I'd stay right on the train with you to Chicago.'

Major Nick Stratton was twenty-three years old.

'Back to the coal mines,' Nick said, and sat down.

Boomer was pouring himself a drink. 'So early?' Nick said.

'I got buttercups, I told ya,' Boomer said, and drank. 'No more mines for me, Nick. I'll do anything, but I'm not going back to no mines.'

Nick stared out at the passing countryside remembering the first time he had seen Boomer's calloused red knees in the shower. That was in Cairo right after Boomer got his field commission, Nick remembered, right after we did the guerilla campaign in Greece. 'Does everyone that works in the mines gets knees like yours?' Nick asked.

'When you start working them as young as I did,' Boomer said, studying Nick's unfinished face, the deepset dark and melancholy eyes. No, he sure as hell don't look twenty-three.

'I wonder what my old man's gonna say when I tell him I'm not goin' back to the mines,' Boomer said. 'I don't think he'd dare to swing at me anymore. You didn't even tell your family you were coming, did you, Nick? They still don't know you're back in the States. Why?'

'I don't know,' Nick said, running his hand over the rough twoday stubble of beard on his leathery face. He knew he ought to shave, but then the scar would bleed and he would not be able to go to the diner for an hour. And he wasn't going to miss this final meal with Boomer.

'You still think you might stay in for a year?' Boomer asked.

'I'm not sure,' Nick said. 'I'm not sure what I want to do.'

In the hospital I think I almost knew. The Army for a year might be a good deal. I've learned a lot in this Army.'

'I'd like to have your chance. I'd like to step into a big going business like your old man's got. I'd just like to have the chance.'

'That's all I wanted once,' Nick said, staring out the window. 'But I've been thinking that maybe there's more to this living than my dad's business. Besides, you don't know old Pete Stratton. I didn't myself until I got away from him. He's a sonofabitch. And he's too goddam smart for me. If I had any sense I wouldn't go home at all. Not now, anyhow.'

'My old man would kill me if I called him a sonofabitch,' Boomer said contemptively. 'But he is, nevertheless.'

'Being a sonofabitch doesn't mean you don't love them,' Nick said. 'We knew a lot of pretty good sonofabitches in this war.'

'And we'll meet a lot in the next one,' Boomer said. 'I still think you're stupid if you stay in for a year when you got a chance to take over that business. Hell, you can always quit.'

'Nobody takes over old Pete Stratton's business. Not until he's dead. Then he'll have it figured out so nobody can. And no one quits him. That's the kind of guy he is. You got five or six generations in this country, Boomer. You don't understand these immigrants.'

'I know immigrants,' Boomer said. 'They're all for their families. I know that. Everybody knows that.'

'Let's eat,' Nick said.

'Have one,' Boomer said.

They had one drink together, silently, and then started for the diner, passing through two Pullman cars into the coaches with their peanut-strewn, cigarette-butted, beer-bottled, paper-filled floors, and the still half-asleep, beat-up-from-no-sleep soldiers in their rumpled smelly khakis, and the little flowered-dressed too young and too overly made-up little doll-wives of this Great Adventure, staring bewilderingly at their swollen stomachs or staring out the windows with their lost, what-have-I-done eyes, this isn't the way it's supposed to be or leaning tiredly on the tired khaki-clad shoulders, inhaling of thick blue smoke and the stale breaths of last night's drunk, and the unceasing wail of small children, and

the sounds of the dice rattling on and on from the crapper.

Now, now that they were here and having that final meal, the awkwardness which had begun to seep into them, and which was undoubtedly the reason for the early morning drinks, the awkwardness began to increase. They had done about everything two men could do together. It would, it seemed to Nick, have been less awkward had one of them been killed, or seperated by the fortunes of war, or something. They just were not used to goodbyes, at that they weren't pros, so they just sat there with a silent awkward sullenness, each waiting for the other to lead, which the other would not, until finally, just out of the multiplying awkwardness and tension, Boomer spoke:

'You're Catholic, ain't you, Nick?'

Probably, had it been anyone else except Boomer, Nick would have laughed. But he didn't.

'I don't know if I am or not. My mother is. My father's Greek Orthodox. My mother told me that she had me baptized in the Catholic Church, but made me promise not to tell my father. I know he had me baptized in the Orthodox Church. I've seen the pictures.'

'How come she wouldn't let you tell your father?'

'Afraid, I guess. God, I was church'd to death when I was a kid. I went to a Catholic school, so Mother had a good excuse to see that I went to Mass every Sunday. Then when I got back from Mass I would drive down to Chicago with my dad and go to the Orthodox Church. That started at nine-thirty and lasted until almost one.' Nick grinned sardonically: 'Christ, how I hated Sundays!'

Then they were silent again, and awkward again. Nick wondered why. Whether it was that there really wasn't anything to say?

'Well,' Boomer said, trying to start it again, 'I guess you know what you're doin'.'

'About what?'

'Your old man. Going into business with him.'

The eggs came, the coffee, toast, and margarine, too. Nick studied the eggs, their texture held his eyes for a moment. The very thought that the eggs might be powdered took part of his appetite away.

'I didn't say I wouldn't. Not emphatically that I wouldn't.'

I just think it would be better to kind of feel my way. Maybe I really want to be a professional man. I don't know. You shouldn't get involved in anything, if you have the chance, if you don't know. I think that's only fair to both sides.'

'We'll keep in touch,' Boomer said.

'Of course,' Nick said. They both knew what they said was a lie, but somehow being a soldier you always managed to say it, Nick thought, no matter how patently trite it was to say it.

'I've got a cousin that's an architect,' Nick said. He really didn't want to say anything. But after all it was his turn to make a lead. In fact, he had missed a turn. 'Maybe I want to be something like that. I don't know.'

'That takes a lot of schooling. You might be awful old by the time you got set up.'

'I don't think that's so important. Not really. Your youth is important of course, but doing what you want I think is even more important. I mean the work you want.'

'I don't understand you, Nick. I feel that what you say is probably right, but I don't understand.'

Suddenly the waiter presented Nick with the cheque. It startled him, almost gave him a sense of guilt for having paused in the middle of all this monumental abruptness.

They went back to their compartments, Boomer went in to get his gear in order, then joined Nick, apologizing for wearing his ribbons, saying that he knew they would make his mother feel good.

• They poured another drink, sat silently, awkwardly for a while, and then the train began to slow down as it came into the outskirts of Pittsburgh.

'I've been thinking,' Boomer said, 'maybe you're right staying in for a while. You know, it ain't really for me to say. I guess that's the trouble with this world. Guys like me so eager to give advice. Too bad a man don't put some of that thinking on himself, maybe he wouldn't get all tied up in a knot trying to see what he looks like through somebody else. Maybe that's the biggest mistake of all.'

As long as Nick had known him, it was one of the few serious things that Boomer had ever said. For a moment it startled Nick. He stared at Boomer, suddenly curious, intrigued in a way, realizing almost shockingly at the

same moment how very little he really knew about Boomer.

But now it was too late. The train began to come jerkingly to a halt. Boomer shouldered his dufflebag and Nick took his case, and they walked up the aisle and stood in the line of departing passengers. There were no civilians on the train platform with the exception of those always privileged few. The train stopped jerkingly. They got off the train, stood on the platform staring at each other for a moment, awkwardly. Then Nick set Boomer's case down.

They shook hands.

'Don't forget to keep in touch,' Boomer said.

'Don't you,' Nick said.

And then the man who had twice saved his life walked away. Nick knew he wouldn't turn around.

Chapter Two

NICK sat for perhaps an hour in his compartment. He was relieved that the tension of the farewell was over. And once sitting there looking at the dismal grey almost black of Pittsburgh as the train pulled out, he thought that Boomer was probably relieved, too. Well, if they met again, he told himself, he would ask him.

At first he just sat there with the loneliness itself, not thinking about what had been, or what was to come, just sat there with the loneliness that welled and welled up, the inexpressible inarticulate hollowness, stillness, quietness, that enveloped you, making you want to put out your arms, to feel and know of love of some sort; of land, of woman, of being understood (finding love in that which you did not understand yourself).

This was not a new thing to him.

This was not some furrow the war had driven into him. He had known this since he was a child. Since that time when he could remember his own first emotions.

And it was not guilt.

• Nor fear. •

Only that inarticulate wanting, that longing, that need to *give or receive* of love – it had to be love. What else? How often he had asked himself that question.

The really terrible thing about it, he thought, after sitting with it half an hour, the really terrible thing about it was that you couldn't convey it because you don't know what it is exactly and, besides, I suppose it's one of those things that somehow (he grinned suddenly sardonically) you think that no one in the world could possibly feel as deeply and as painfully as you have, therefore it would be an impossible thing for anyone to understand to begin with.

That paradox again. The very thought (paradox) looming up hugely in front of him like the head of the Great Sphinx; forever there. Alone. Solitary. I am here, the Sphinx said, and you must learn to live with me.

No matter how rotten it sounded, Nick thought, it was a truth that it takes shit to fertilize a rose.

I wonder if they're still arguing like they used to. Hell, Mother wouldn't like me to think of him as Old Pete. That is, unless they had just had an argument. I wonder if Old Pete ever felt lonely. Or did he ever have the time? Or, more important, is that why he wouldn't give himself the time?

I wonder if they're still arguing like they used to. Hell, the war wouldn't have put a stop to that. It would take more than a simple war.

Maybe that's why he always had his tail in a sling with one of them or the other. Because he always ended up on the wrong side of one of them; the one who didn't get to him first. That is, he always ended up on the wrong side if he hadn't known the argument was coming. He had learned by the time he was fourteen that when there was one coming he must get out of the house on one pretense or another. But most of the time he came back before the argument ended. Probably because they never seemed to end it until one of them got some sort of sympathetic reaction from someone who was not involved in the argument, in actuality didn't know what it was all about, and after hearing them explain their respective sides, couldn't possibly know what it was all about – as most of the time later they couldn't remember how it had even started.

It was really very stupid, he thought, grinning at the picture of it. Two grown people, one a respected and I suppose by now powerful businessman, the other a beautiful, well-educated and extremely poised woman: she sitting and he probably pacing in the huge living-room, there they were, with teeth bared, about to strike, it seemed; then turning to him still in his knickers, turning to him as if, truly, he were the parent, yes, and they the children.

It was as if soon after they were married they had each prepared briefs on which the entire pattern of their marriage was based; a basic document that they each stuck to, no matter what the conflict. Maybe, Nick thought now, the reason they did argue was so that each would never have a few moments, in the process of the argument, in which to remind the other by expounding on their own merits and backgrounds how really fortunate the other was to have him or her, depending on who had the floor.

These dissertations were always piecemeal, of course. Because it seemed that no matter how many virtues or merits each was sure they had, somewhere they had lost the merit of courtesy, so that if there was anything to be said it had to be said quickly before the other interrupted. Old Pete was, of course, the first to sense this, and consequently got his licks in acidly quick, enabling him to cause the most frustration the quickest. The thing that Old Pete never did understand was that in spite of this initial advantage he would often lose the argument eventually simply because his wife would immediately yet so very subtly retreat, and then Pete would, savouringly, also retreat just long enough to think that he had won, then as the maleness in him bloated up and softened him, then would come the counterattack.

Then after several more rounds, usually more out of tiredness and complicatedness rather than victory, they would make up, each then expounding on the merits and virtues of each other. It was very much like two pugilists who had beaten the hell out of each other, then embraced. It never seemed to reduce the scar tissue on either one.

It was very much like the war, too, Nick thought. Very very much, he contemplated, unconsciously fingering the four-inch scar along his cheek and jawbone. And like the war, no one won. My God, he suddenly felt like giggling, maybe

that's why I'm alive. In a way I've been in a sort of training since the first slap I had on the backside!

Still sitting in the compartment, his mind a void, nevertheless a lonely void augmented by that coke grey of outer Pittsburgh, those narrow houses packed as tightly together as a row of infantry in parade formation, and like a row of infantry (hard as it was to believe) each possessed of a life and love, a heartbeat and heartbreak, a focal point around which the entire world revolved, still sitting there it had not occurred to Nick where he would stay or what he would do when he got to Chicago. Or, more important, whom he would call.

At first he thought of staying at the Stephens, not only because it was near the Twelfth Street Station, but because it was out of the Loop where he might be recognized by someone who might inform his family that he was home before he had had the chance himself to do so. Certainly knowing them as he did, he would not want to hurt them, humiliate them, in that way. Then he remembered the Stephens had been taken over by the Army. He would try the Blackstone.

But what would he do? More and more the idea of going to Chicago, without going home as soon as he arrived, seemed a little silly and childish.

He would have to go home eventually, anyhow, as long as he was in town. And after all, for almost three years, almost all his spare time, with the exception of that time that he spent in the hospital, had been spent doing exactly what he was going to do now: checking in at some hotel with the highest aspirations in the world—just to lay around, have good food and drink, think, regain perhaps some of the personality that had been thudded out of him on the battlefields where every man left part of his identity.

It never worked out that way. It ended up the same way in every hotel, in every town, in every country: drinking, whoring, fighting, anything to escape the often terrifying loneliness that engulfed him; each spiritual, mental and sexual drunk accompanied by its spiritual, mental and sexual counterpart, a hangover. (The basic law of action and reaction. Loneliness was his hot water bottle, and it seemed at times that half his life he had a hangover of one sort or another.)

Maybe all that was a habit, too, he thought.

Well, it was the Blackstone Hotel then. He could walk down Michigan Avenue in the mornings in the spring sun. And if he was lucky he would be able to see the Lake and the park from his room.

Then suddenly in his mind he saw the Art Institute with its two great sculptured lions standing massively on their great stone slabs, and the wide-stepped wide stone stairways (he had counted the steps once, was it twenty-seven or twenty-nine?) then recalling vividly for a moment the first time he was there as a small boy. He must have been only six or seven then, and how he had seen the statue of the nude woman and how he blushed and didn't want to look at it, yet wanting to, too, and his mother making him, telling him that a woman's body was the most beautiful form ever created on this earth, that no art had ever really done it justice. And he had looked at it, recalling now so vividly the shame and embarrassment that he had felt, that even now he could feel that same shame and embarrassment flooding up within him.

Later, alone, he had spent many hours there.

After his walks in the morning, he would go there, too. And maybe to a concert if there was one he liked. This time he would give himself that chance to think.

Maybe he could get Ellen to do it with him. I wonder if she's married, he thought. So many people got married, the letters had said. I shouldn't have stopped writing to her, he thought regretfully.

It would be hard to believe she was married. That is, unless you met her husband.

But she wouldn't be married, he told himself. She would have sent an announcement at least. There was that much bitchiness in her, at the very very least that much. Ellen the fair, the square, the angel-faced rich bitch with her Marywood, and her Lake Forest, and her poetry. Well, she was a damn good poet, anyhow. And damn good at other things, too. The remarkable thing was the way she had protected her reputation, he remembered admiringly. I wonder if she still has everyone thinking she might become a nun.

It would be good if he could get ahold of her now. She wouldn't say anything about his being in town. And she was

intelligent and good company. Very good company, he remembered vividly now.

Suddenly, though he didn't know it, the loneliness was gone.

It would be a damn good thing for me too. You haven't been out with a decent, respectable, intelligent woman since this damn war began. God, I hope she didn't get fat. No, she was too intelligent for that. (Of course she would never let that happen; she had too much self-respect to let that happen, he told himself.)

Well, he would have to make a plan. Get her in from Lake Forest sometime tomorrow early; his mind began to calculate.

Chapter Three

OLD Pete Stratton was sitting behind the big mahogany desk of his office in the Field Building. He hung up the phone, a half smile of satisfaction on his face, and got up and walked across the thick pale Moroccan rug pausing for a moment to glance at his own caricature framed in a gold frame on the mantel of the blue marble false fireplace.

The caricature showed him, his short stocky body dwarfed, his head hugely exaggerated, holding a pennant in each hand. The pennant in his left hand was held down by his left side and was inscribed: Old Chicago. His right hand was inserting a pennant onto the top of a building of almost skyscraper proportions. It read: Greater Chicago.

Over the fireplace hung a huge oil painting of the Acropolis which he had purchased for a considerable amount while attending the McCormick auction with his wife. He knew nothing of paintings when he had made the purchase. He still didn't. And still thought that the price was outrageous: but the Acropolis was famous and was Greek. And Old Pete Stratton was Greek. He was now sixty-seven years old and had gone only as far as the third grade in a hill town above Sparta before coming to America at eleven.

Since that time he had had no formal schooling but spoke well with but an occasional slight trace of accent. And had taught himself to read and write English and was very quick with figures.

He was short, stocky, with pure white hair and did not look Greek, or even half-Greek, or foreign at all. He wore gold-rimmed glasses and in spite of a severe heart attack fourteen years before was in excellent health.

Still standing there with his thumbs thrust into his vest pockets he looked down rubbing his shoe into the carpet, feeling its richness, feeling too that inward satisfaction that he always got when he recalled the carpet hadn't cost him a dime. Nine years before, he recalled, when he had been buying carpets for the lobby of seven of their theatres he had spotted this piece while in the showroom of one of the carpet distributors that were bidding. He finally told the distributor that the deal was his if he would throw in the Moroccan rug.

Business being what it was then, nineteen thirty-six, the distributor had readily consented. Old Pete Stratton did not hesitate telling his two partners, who were Greek also, that he had the carpet thrown in for himself. Then he had taken it home and put it in the basement, where it stayed for seven years, along with a lot of other things Pete had acquired (he never threw away anything). Then when their operations grew so big, due primarily to the war, and they were forced to move from their old building to larger quarters, though Pete himself had objected vehemently to moving into the Field Building because he knew they would have to furnish their offices accordingly which was not only expensive, Pete had stated at the Board meeting, but would also incline to make the motion picture distributors raise the price of pictures because it would look like they were making a lot of money; which they were. But, for once, Pete was outvoted.

They moved. So finally after seven years the carpet that had lain in the basement of the big house out in Winnetka, the carpet that did not cost a dime, was laid much to Old Pete's satisfaction.

On top of the carpet Pete had however placed his old roll-top desk from the old building on North Clark, which once his wife Mary had seen, and after having seen the offices of his partners, had relentlessly and adamantly insisted that he

replace, which he just as relentlessly and adamantly insisted he would not.

Then two months after they had moved in, which was in forty-four, the present year being forty-five, Pete had gone to Florida for a two weeks' rest. When he returned he found that his desk had been replaced, his walls papered, drapes hung, and the false marble fireplace installed, all by his wife Mary, of course, and for which he received a fantastic bill from Marshall Field which he would not pay until he was finally threatened with suit.

He would still raise hell occasionally with his wife for taking this initiative. Inwardly however he was really very proud of the office, it was by far the nicest of the offices; not quite as large an office as one of his partners' but nevertheless the nicest. It had been, too, his own idea of taking the painting of the Acropolis out of the basement of the Winnetka House and putting it over the false fireplace.

From the carpet he glanced up once again at the caricature, then took a cigar from his vest pocket. Behind him the door opened. He listened but did not move. Then his secretary spoke:

'Mr Stratton, Mrs Stratton's on the phone again.'

Old Pete turned around slowly, the cigar in his mouth now, but unlit, staring at her for a moment as if she were not really there. Miss Keith, Miss Betsy Keith, wondered why now that he was in the big money *again* he wouldn't stop smoking those ten cent cigars.

• 'I told you to tell her I was busy. I'll call later.'

'She said she's leaving the house. She wants to talk to you before she goes,' she hesitated. 'She's on the line,' she said advisedly, using the prerogative she had acquired in being in his service for over seventeen years. She was about the homeliest woman Pete Stratton had ever seen: middle fifties, bone-thin, slightly bucktoothed, a beak nose supporting gold-rimmed glasses.

Old Pete nodded emphatically. She watched him as he strode towards his desk; short, well but not too heavy set, bullnecked, the neat tailored back of the expensive blue sharkskin suit, the white pure white of his hair, the determination in the walk itself. He sat down and picked up the phone. Automatically Miss Keith left.

'Hello Dolly,' Bete Stratton said in a new voice; a tired resigned voice; as if he had arrived at the office twelve instead of three hours before. 'God Bless You . . . How are you?' he said in that tired dramatic way of his, as if he were rendering a benediction. 'I've been tied up.'

'I've been trying to get you for two hours,' Mary Stratton lated, almost sensual. She was in fact forty-three; twenty-four years Pete Stratton's junior.

'I haven't been taking any calls,' he said tiredly. Holding said. She had a very young voice on the phone; soft, modulated the phone to his ear, with his shoulder he picked up the desk lighter and lit his cigar. 'We had a meeting.'

'That's what Miss Keith said. I wondered if you heard from Nick.'

'I told you I'd call if I did. I don't know what's wrong with that goddamn kid.'

'Now, Pete, you know the boy's been in the hospital.'

'I also know from the last time we heard from him, which must have been a month ago . . .'

'It was three weeks, Pete.'

'I also know from the last we heard,' he continued on as if he hadn't heard her interruption, 'that it wasn't too serious. Damn it, he should have plenty of time to write, laying around a hospital or one of those fancy rest camps. Nowadays no one has any respect. Here I am getting up in years, building something for my son to carry on, and he don't even write a letter. What the hell kind of kid is that?'

'You don't know what the boy's been through,' she said protectively. 'You know my intuition: I've a feeling that boy was hurt much worse than he let on.'

'There's no reason for him putting you through this. The other sons write. How do you think I feel? I ran into Gus Duck today. And he says what do you hear from the kid? What the hell am I supposed to say? How do you think I feel? How do . . .'

'Now don't get excited, Pete. You know it's not good for you.'

'Who wouldn't get excited? A son should help his father. Not worry him.'

'We'll hear from him soon,' she spoke softly; soothing now.

Then in a new voice: 'Pete, you didn't leave me any money this morning.'

'I give you money day before yesterday. My God, you didn't spend all that money . . .'

'Darling, you know this is a big month with your niece getting married. And you giving the wedding. You promised her. Certainly you want it to be nice. What's the use of spending five or six thousand on a wedding and not even having her presentable.'

'Haven't you anything in your account?'

'I told you Monday that I was overdrawn. You remember. At breakfast.'

'Oh God,' Pete Stratton said tiredly. 'All right I'll call Green at the bank. It makes me feel like hell though. It makes me feel cheap as hell always calling him about your account.'

'But Pete, if you'd put a sizeable amount in there I would not have to overdraw. The wife of Pete Stratton ought to have a sizeable account.'

'I'll call Green,' he said resignedly. 'I'm going out of town tomorrow for a few days.'

'I'll get your things together.'

'All right Dolly,' he said.

'I love you Pete,' Mary Stratton said.

'I love you, Dolly,' Pete Stratton said, thinking of her now. She was certainly a beautiful woman. No Greek in the country had as beautiful a woman as Pete Stratton. Goddamn it, though, he thought for a moment, I probably should have married a Greek girl. No Greek girl would spend money like she did. An old country girl knew the value of a dollar. 'God Bless You, Dolly,' he said tiredly.

'Take care of yourself, Pete. And don't get excited. You know it's bad for your heart. Goodbye, Pete. And don't worry about Nick.'

If I don't worry about my son who was going to, he felt like saying, but felt like getting off the phone even more. Certainly Nick wasn't worried about anything. 'I won't worry . . . God Bless You,' he said tiredly, in that almost dramatic way he had of saying it, that always pious way as if he were really truly entrusted with the powers of benediction. He hung up.

Not so tiredly he called Miss Keith on the intercom and

told her to get Green at the bank. All right he would try once more. He would put five hundred in her account instead of the usual two-fifty. It wouldn't last any longer than the two-fifty, he thought. What did she need all that cash for anyhow. She had charge accounts all over. Suddenly a half chill ran through him as he thought of how she tipped. He got Green on the line and told him to put five hundred in her account.

During Pete Stratton's conversation with Green of the First City Bank he asked him to lunch if he was free, which he was. Green was the president of the First City Bank and Pete could just as easily have called one of the vice presidents or clerks to have the funds transferred from his account to his wife's.

But it was an opportunity to talk to Green, to be friendly with him. And Old Pete took every opportunity. Besides having the funds transferred he had a chance to very subtly expound on how his wife was careless with money thereby showing (Pete thought) his own great respect for it, besides his great sense of responsibility.

For two months now Pete had been working secretly with Green in an attempt to find a suitable new partner for the business. It wasn't that the business wasn't solvent. It was. In fact it was presently netting over ten thousand a week. The fact was that Pete owned only one third of the business and the fact that his two partners were brothers had, since it had become such a big business, begun to bother Pete. It wasn't that he didn't trust his partners, he told himself over and over, but that a dollar was a dollar and business was business. Besides he felt he could deal with them. But supposing something happened to him, what then? Young Nick was still wet behind the ears and those two guys would take Nick like Detroit took the Cubs in the '06 series, merely, probably by conning Nick into believing the Company wasn't doing too well, by evaluating his stock far below its actual value for him, and then offering him more than they said it was worth. Still this would be a considerable amount, Pete had analyzed, but Nick had no business experience and wouldn't have the slightest idea what to do with the money once he got his hands on it.

So Pete had the idea of bringing another partner into the firm to serve as a buffer against the brother combination. You can't beat blood, Pete knew.

Old Pete had figured it out very carefully. They (the partners) had agreed that each would go to Greece for one year at the Company expense. Before one of them was to leave Pete would suggest an expansion programme, which would be large enough to require new capital.

They would go to Green for the money and Green would suggest a new partner, which of course previously had been picked by Green and Pete. Primarily by Pete. Also Pete would secretly put up some of his own private capital to help finance the new partner as he would have to pay premium prices for the stock, and for this the new partner would have to sign a secret agreement with Pete to sell him back some of his newly acquired stock after five years, which would of course eventually make Pete the majority stockholder. But he had to have a man he could trust. Perhaps someone in his own family he had thought once but immediately dismissed that idea. That would make it much too obvious. George and Charlie Stratos were not that stupid. In fact his partners George and Charlie Stratos were not stupid at all. But the deal would have to be worked out soon as Charlie was leaving for Europe with his family in six months, conditions being all right over there by then.

It was good Charlie was going first, Pete thought. He was the older and really the brains. Of course George was coming along. But you really couldn't expect too much from George at thirty-four, having never had any real big business experience.

Besides Pete felt he could handle Charlie. Charlie had his weaknesses. For one thing he liked to gamble too much. He didn't gamble in that friendly game with the Greeks that Pete played in. It was a bad bunch Charlie gambled with; those truly professional gamblers. Mostly Italians. That was really inviting trouble, gambling with Italians, Pete thought.

On top of that, in spite of the fact that young George was always courteous and respectful to Pete (to this day after thirteen years of association he never called him Pete but rather Mr Stratton) Charlie was overly severe, often almost disrespectfully bossy with the employees of the firm. Either

that or overly familiar and overly friendly and generous.

But when it came to business, especially the buying of pictures, young George like his brother Charlie, would fight and pinch literally wearing down the distributors (one would argue price while the other relaxed at a local steam bath, then the other would take over and the one that was presently almost argued out would leave under one pretense or another, then he would go to the steam bath, get massaged, sleep for a while perhaps, then return and take over again) then once the deal was made by one or the other, the figure usually being a compromise one, with the distributor taking the short end of the compromise out of sheer exhaustion, then as an extra added attraction when the other brother returned and the price was announced the other brother would begin to argue vehemently with the brother who had fixed the figure, saying that they would suffer severe losses at such a price.

They would argue to the point (all this in front of the distributor) that it appeared they were about to take violent physical action towards each other. The net result of this was that often the distributor, aware of the Stratos ability to run theatres and especially to exploit pictures, the distributor would often change his figure giving them the price they had requested originally.

Playing it out to the end they would leave the distributor's office separately, still apparently in a frenzy with each other: leaving the distributor, of course, with a great sense of guilt. Setting him up actually for the next bout. They would leave separately and then meet somewhere for maybe one cocktail, they hardly ever drank much, and gloat over the coup they had pulled off. Both of them eager to get back to the office and tell Pete the price, or if it was after office hours to phone him the deal they had made. Old Pete Stratton was the money man of the corporation. Often Old Pete, after hearing how the Stratos brothers had pulled off a buying deal would think to himself that, yes, those guys really belonged in the movie business: they should have been actors.

He looked at his watch: eleven-thirty. There was an hour before he had to meet Green downstairs. He sat back in the swivel chair, puffed his cigar, glanced momentarily once more at his caricature on the mantel. He felt satisfied. They

had come a long way with this company in the last thirteen years.

Nineteen thirty-two. He was about the only Greek who had any money at all then. It was really hard to believe that Charlie and George Stratos were in a jail cell that year. Jailed for the money they had extorted from two of their partners in three theatres; extorted really in an attempt to save the theatres. Then they had called for Old Pete and they told him their plan and he got them out and they started. Started with one lousy little theatre, only three hundred seats, on the outskirts of Gary in the residential district where the mill workers lived.

A long way. Now fifty-six theatres in three states. The absolute control of over fourteen towns. And the buildings they had bought in the towns. I bet we could get two million for the operation right now, he thought satisfyingly. You're damn right we could. It was worth it. Two million. And all the actual cash he had taken out of his pocket was thirty thousand.

The phone rang. It was a contractor interested in bidding on a major overhaul job they were doing on a theatre in Milwaukee. Pete referred him to George Stratos. That was his department.

After Pete hung up he pondered for a moment. I wonder if George is getting kickbacks from those contractors he hires. Or from the candy machine operators. Hell, that could run into a lot of money. A hell of a lot the way we're going. Pete thought about it a few minutes longer, then pulled out his key ring and after finding the correct key opened the bottom drawer of his desk. He pulled out a steel strong box and after momentarily searching the key ring again unlocked the box.

In the box there was thirty thousand in non-negotiable stocks (blue chips every one). Several insurance policies. Four keys to safety deposit vaults each with a tag and the first name of Pete and the last name of four towns in Greece, Pete Saloniki, Pete Verdamah, Pete Sparta, Pete Athens, (Verdamah was the name of the town where Pete was born), and below the name was the city or town where the bank was located; all crudely but neatly printed in Pete's own hand in ink. There were also some promissory notes.

He examined the stocks. It didn't take him long. It was a

ritual with him. He had examined them so often that he could tell by the weight of the packet if one was missing.

They were the stocks, his will said, that would provide the immediate cash for the family in case of his death, while his estate was being probated, though there would be little to probate. Pete had taken a bankruptcy in nineteen thirty and consequently all his holdings were listed under the names of various members of his family. Not his immediate family only, but under the names of his brothers, cousins, nieces.

Then he studied the promissory notes. He had out over twenty thousand. Well, what the hell, he said to himself, if you can't help your countrymen out when times are tough what good are you. They were good for it. Everyone that he had loaned money to was doing good. It was good to give. God would know he had given. HE always knew when you did something good for your fellow men.

He carefully put all the papers back into the box, locked it, put it back in the drawer. Locked the drawer. Then he picked up last month's financial statement and put it in his inside coat pocket.

He rang for Miss Keith. She came in with her dictation pad and sat down.

He began abruptly:

'Take a letter to my son.'

Dear Nick: (He hesitated a moment.)

Your mother is going crazy because you haven't written. You know, Nick, what a wonderful mother you have. You shouldn't do things like that. I worry too. About you, the business, the whole family. I'm way up in years, son. The business needs you. Your mother needs you. I need you. Write your mother, son.

Take care of yourself. We pray for you. You pray too, son. It will never hurt you. God Bless You . . .

*Love,
Dad.*

There were tears in Pete Stratton's eyes, Miss Keith could see.

'How I love that boy,' Pete Stratton said all choked up. 'Miss Keith, you don't know how I worry about that boy.'

Old Pete removed his glasses and wiped his eyes.

'I wonder what's wrong with that kid,' he said.

'Nick's all right, Mr Stratton. I've known Nick since he was a little boy. I wouldn't worry, Mr Stratton. You know how the mail from overseas is.'

'Nick's twenty-three now,' Pete Stratton said putting the glasses back on. 'When I was twenty-three I had twelve years of work behind me. I had two businesses of my own by the time I was twenty-three. Experience. That kid's gotta get going. Experience.'

'Yes, Mr Stratton,' Miss Keith said. She drooled slightly when she spoke. 'Anything else?'

'I almost forgot,' Old Pete said. He reached in his pocket and took out two stubs from yesterday's game between the Cubs and Pittsburgh. 'Put these in the letter. And add: 'The Cubs are in first place. They got a real chance for the pennant.' He ought to get a kick out of that.'

She took the stubs and stood up.

'I won't be back today. And we're going out of town in the morning. You know where to get me if anything important comes up.'

'Have a nice trip . . . and don't worry about Nick,' Betsie Keith said in an almost motherly way.

Old Pete looked up at her for a moment. Goddamn it but she was homely. 'Watch out for things. And if anything comes in from Nick call his mother.'

Pete Stratton got up from behind his desk and walked past the fireplace and opened a closet door. There was a washstand and mirror and cabinet in the closet. He carefully removed the ruby ring from the little finger of his left hand, washed, combed his hair, put the ring back on, straightened his tie, adjusted his tailored blue sharkskin suitcoat to his shoulders. Then as he was about to switch out the light he heard his office door open and in the mirror saw the older of his partners, Charlie Stratos, come in.

'How's things, Charlie?' Pete said gaily, turning out the light, then turning round.

'Hello Pete,' he said drearily.

Charlie Stratos had walked across the room and was leaning on the desk; unsmiling, tired, worried, and unkempt. He

had on the same suit this week as he had worn the last two weeks, Pete noticed. A cheap wrinkled imitation flannel. His shoes were old and unshined, his dark but greying hair which grew so far down on his forehead that he had hardly any forehead at all, was mussed as usual. Charlie took off his horn-rimmed glasses, wiped his eyes, took out his handkerchief and blew his huge wide nose, running the back of his hand scratchingly over his slightly pock-marked face. One collar of his shirt was pointing so far upwards that it almost touched his neck, Pete noticed feeling suddenly squeamish.

'I think we'd better change our plans for tomorrow,' Charlie said. 'I had a call from Poulous in Indianapolis just now. That union fellow down in Peru is making trouble.'

'The one we paid off last month?' Pete asked.

'Raker,' George nodded.

'The sonofabitch,' Pete said. 'What does he want?'

'He's going to ask for a raise for the projector operators.'

'He's not.'

'That's what Poulous said,' Charlie said. 'We better go down to Peru first. We can go to Youngstown after that. I thought we might have trouble with the fellow.'

'Poulous said we would,' Pete said. 'That Poulous is coming along. He's a worker, that kid . . . You think you can handle this fellow?'

'We got to handle him,' Charlie said worriedly. 'If the word gets out that he took us every one of our territories will want a raise.'

'The sonofabitch,' Pete Stratton said thoughtfully again. 'You think he wants more money.'

'I'm not sure. We'd better go there first though, Pete. All right?'

'All right by me,' Pete said.

'We'll talk in the car tomorrow then,' Charlie said dryly, unsmilingly, wiping his face with his handkerchief, his now glassless eyes half squinting for a vision of Pete.

'I'll pick you up at eight,' Pete said. Then concernedly, meditatively, holding the now unlit cigar in his hand, staring meditatively upwards, Pete Stratton as if vested with a consummate authority of some sort rendered judgment once more. 'That rotten sonofabitching Raker.'

Chapter Four

THE banker Lawrence Green was not there at the bar in the Field Building restaurant when Pete Stratton arrived. Yet, although it was only a little after twelve, the bar was already crowded. He ordered a Manhattan, then standing waiting for his drink looked around the room of lunching business men nodding or waving to some of his many acquaintances.

He put his foot on the bar step and leaned forward, his ear spread to the conversation of two men standing to his left. You could never tell when you might pick up a good thing in *this* La Salle Street bar, Old Pete knew.

'How long do you think it will last?' one said.

'Seven months at the most. It can't last any longer. With Germany gone, and Russia staring down Japan's back they'll have to end it. Or commit race suicide - I wouldn't put that past them.'

'Hell, I don't think it will last that long.'

And that was all that Pete Stratton heard before Lawrence Green walked up beside him. Short, thin, grey-haired, with his distinguished long angular Jewish nose, and his pince-nez, Lawrence Green, president of First City Bank of Chicago, director of nineteen corporations.

• 'Lawrence,' Pete Stratton greeted, shaking the banker's hand and putting his other hand on his shoulder. 'You're looking fine. Fine.'

'How have you been, Pete?'

• 'For a man my age, very well, thank God - I thought we might have a drink here at the bar before going to the table.'

'A martini would be fine.'

Old Pete ordered the martini.

They chatted about this and that for a moment, the usual vagaries, then the banker asked: 'How's the family . . . what do you hear from Nick?'

Pete Stratton who at that moment was sipping on his Manhattan, quickly took another sip, then put down the glass.

'I heard from him a few days ago. I meant to bring the letter. He wanted to be remembered to you . . . He's getting along fine. Fine. We're praying he'll be home soon.'

The martini came. They toasted each other: 'Happy days.' And drank.

'That's a hell of a thing to live with, Lawrence, having your son in the war. You don't know how many nights I stay up worrying. It's hell, this thing. Hell.'

Lawrence Green stared over his martini glass with those quick green, cold eyes obviously engrossed in some sudden thought. Then he smiled and set the glass down on the bar.

'It will be over soon,' the banker said, 'Sooner than a lot of people think. Then we can get back to normal.'

'What do you think it will do to business?' Pete asked humbly. 'Do you think we're going to have another depression?'

'Recession might be better. Then good times, Pete. The best times this country ever had. Even better than the days when I used to come into your club. Better than that. A great new prosperous America.'

'There has to be. We need homes. Buildings. More space for more people. We have to build. Build. Build.'

'That's right. We have to go ahead. We have to,' Pete Stratton said trying to hide the feeling of sheer pleasure that had begun somewhere in the pit of this stomach and was now in his chest, and still moving upwards.

Green, as always, exuding confidence, a glowing confidence, always left Pete with a smattering of that very confidence. Often, later however, Pete would wonder how much of Green's confidence was real. After all it was a banker's job, his living, to keep the people building so that he could lend them money at big interest and if that didn't work out take over the property ten cents on the dollar.

Old Pete had lost enough property in the depression to know that. Yet there was a real confidence in Green. Pete always left Green feeling good, and felt good hours later. But too he was always thinking after he left Green. Hours later the thoughts would turn to analyzation then usually, eventually, to suspicion. After all who but the bankers took his property away in the last depression.

'Things ought to be good for my nephew then,' Pete said. 'He's going to be a great architect someday. He had the highest average ever to come out of LIT. I had a hell of a time putting him through that school, Lawrence. Times were tough then. Damn tough . . . They even gave him a fellowship to study in four countries. LIT is about the best for an architect.'

'It is. I know your nephew, Pete. In fact I ran into him on the street one day just after the war started. He reminds me a lot of Nick. I don't mean their looks, though they do look something alike. It was something else. I remember I couldn't place what it was. His first name is Pierro, isn't it? Pierro Stratton. That's right. You've got a nice family, Pete. A nice family. And you've come a long way. You should be grateful,' the banker spoke sincerely.

Pete Stratton crossed himself quickly, 'I thank God every night,' he said solemnly. Then in a new voice: 'You know my niece is getting married. We haven't sent out the invitations yet. But I hope you'll be able to come.'

'It depends on the Mrs,' Green said, knowing full well he wasn't going to any Greek wedding. One of those had been enough for him. And for his wife. 'She hasn't been feeling well, lately.'

'I'm sorry to hear it,' Pete said.

'Is Pierro back from the service yet?'

'Two weeks ago. He looks great. Great,' Pete said exuberantly.

• 'He ought to have a wonderful future with all the building we have to do. Tell him to drop in and say hello. Anytime.'

'That's nice of you, Lawrence - To ask. I'm sure you can give the boy some good advice.'

'I like boys, Pete. That's been my one big heartache not having a son of my own . . . Well, shall we eat?'

They had lunch. During lunch they discussed mostly the inner operation of Interstate Theatres. Pete liked to keep Green informed as well as possible of what was going on; to make him feel a real part of the Company. In fact it had been Pete's own idea to offer Green ten percent of their stock at seventy-five cents on the dollar and a directorship the year before. Green of course accepted.

Old Pete had known Green ever since 1918 when Green

had come in his club with a party to hear a new singer named Sophie Tucker who was causing a sensation. Later, when Pete had decided to build another building across the street on the vacant corner from his club building he had gone to Green for the backing and they had done business on and off ever since.

Green was not the one who foreclosed on Pete's property after the crash however. Greens did not foreclose themselves. They merely transferred the mortgages to another bank which they controlled; had their men make the foreclosures; thereby not only insuring their reputation for 'fair play' but actually taking advantage of an adverse condition to better their standing in the community of finance.

Finally Old Pete brought Green up to date; including the trouble that they were having with the union man, Raker, and which Pete had just found out about himself a half-hour before.

Pete, of course, reassured Green that the Raker matter would be settled; adding that the entire industry of exhibitors would benefit from their speedy expedition of the union case.

Finally Pete gave Green the financial statement for the past month. He never mailed it; always gave it to him personally. Green had only glanced at it, smiled, and put it into his breast pocket. Then Pete paid the cheque and walked Green back to the First City Bank which was just down the street one block from the Field Building on La Salle.

After Pete Stratton left Green he went immediately across the street to Martins restaurant and phoned his nephew Pierro at Pierro's mother's apartment on the Near North Side. He made arrangements to meet the young architect in half an hour at Lou Duck's restaurant near the Drake Hotel.

It would work out good, he thought. He had about an hour to kill and it was about time he had a talk with Pierro; at least feel him out on what his plans were. Christ, he'd been home over two weeks now and hadn't made one attempt to get a job or get set up in his own office or do anything except attend parties out on the North Shore; occasionally stopping by Pete's house in Winnetka on the way out or way back.

What the hell was the matter with kids these days. Pierro must be close to thirty. And what does he do. And with his

education. Youth. Opportunity. If I'd only had that opportunity. The country on the verge of a great prosperity. Cocktail parties. And the buildings about to go up. It didn't make sense. What the hell does he think he's going to do? Live off me the rest of his life. A big stiff like that. Smart. Educated . . . Waste . . . Waste . . . Waste . . . Of Talent. Material. And the people in my country starving. Dammit I forgot to send that cheque to my family in Verdamah.

I'll build another church there too. Dammit I will. So the Germans tore my church down. Well, I'll build another. What the hell kind of people were the Germans. Savages. Tearing down my church. Blowing up the road I built. That I worked like a dirty dog, AND SAVED, TO BUILD. The world's gone crazy. It's not like the old days. The good old days, he thought . . . and suddenly now he was far down La Salle, past Randolph Street and the Sherman Hotel, almost to Lake Avenue and passing a fruit stand.

He went inside and bought some raisins and nuts and walked over the La Salle Street Bridge nibbling on the raisins and nuts when he wasn't holding his brown homburg against the spring wind that came from Lake funneling down Wacker, feeling the warm sunglow on his face (it had been a cold winter for an old man) then cut eastward towards the Lake, and up the ramp onto Michigan Avenue, and the young pretty (Youth Again) office girls, June sun-tanned legs exposed by God's own wind coming from out over the blue Lake, and the rush rush of the traffic on Michigan Avenue, and the breasts from under the sweaters that did not sag (Youth again) but seemed to reach out to God's own wind coming from out over the blue Lake . . .

The rush, rush, honk, honk.

Everything was uniform . . . Khaki clad . . . Navy clad.

'Pete, Pete Stratton, haven't seen you in years.'

'Jack Downey. Old Jack Downey.'

'Real estate now, Pete.'

'Theatre business, Jack.'

Down the Avenue, past the white of the Wrigley Building. The Tribune Tower. 'EXTRA . . . EXTRA . . . TRUMAN TO POTSDAM.'

The wide Avenue with the big expensive Buildings.
Saks. Oh my God. Saks.

And the June sun-tanned legs exposed by God's own wind from out over the blue Lake.

It was a great country. A Great Country, all right.

To walk. To feel the June sunglow. The Bigness.

AMERICA . . . THE CUBS . . . THE SERIES . . . MAYBE THE WORLD SERIES . . . THIS YEAR.

He had never really been able to explain to anyone back in Verdamah what a really great country it was. It was too Great for that.

It was good to walk.

Pierro wouldn't walk though. He'd take a cab. He ain't got a pot to pee in but he'll take a cab. What was wrong with kids nowadays. And all this opportunity.

Chapter Five

PIERRO STRATTON, first cousin of Nick Stratton, nephew of Old Pete Stratton, sat in his bedroom on the second floor of the two-storey walkup just off Ohio Street on the Near North Side. Before him on a battered old card table were two gallon containers each half-filled with water. In his hand was a rubber hose.

For the past hour, with the exception of that time he had gone to the phone to talk to Old Pete, he had been blowing on the hose, forcing the water from one jug into the other, strengthening the one lung he had left. Pierro Stratton was twenty-nine years old. His other lung he had left at a beach town in Italy called Anzio.

He inhaled deeply, blew once more on the hose, wincing slightly. The water in one of the containers gurgled. Slowly he lowered the rubber tube onto the table staring abstractedly for a moment at the jugs. Then his eyes lowered slowly to the table, to a heavy bronze medallion four inches in diameter.

He reached over and picked it up holding it gently in his hands for a moment feeling its solid heaviness, its coolness,

then ran the palm of one hand over his own image engraved in the bronze in profile.

He turned it over:

PIERRO J. STRATTON
LIT
FIRST WORLD FELLOWSHIP
ARCHITECTURE
1937

He gazed at the lettering for a moment, then got up, and inching between the unmade bed and the card table, went over to his draughting board and set the medallion down carefully face up in the upper right hand corner.

Standing there hunched over the drafting table in the dingy room that had been his room for seventeen years, the half-light sifting in from the window that looked out at the dirty brick wall of the building next door, standing in his old red wool bathrobe he had from his first year at LIT and was now almost a part of him; had warmed him as he studied in the cold and late of winter nights and early mornings (he had taken it with him and studied in it again in Athens, Rome, Paris, and Bloomfield Hills, then taken it back to Paris and Rome during the war) standing there studying the image of himself he felt the fear begin to well up, the horrible inadequacy multiplying with each silent second.

He was a goddamn Stratton all right. A Stravoupoulos. There was no difference. It was there in the protuberant forehead, in the high cheek bones, in the square cut almost fighter's nose, in the deepset of the eyes: Stratton.

A goddamn syphilitic Stratton.

Remembering now suddenly, vividly, the fear of every blood-test. The hollow inadequacy and inferiority intermingled with the shame and fears as he waited for every result. Days or years? Time really had no perspective he learned after the first time, his last year in high school.

He was fifteen then.

And since, every cut – boil – pimple – producing again that same thwart-frustration-fear. Even when he embraced his mother the shame of the fear of not wanting to kiss her on the mouth. She did not have it. And still could not quite comprehend what it was. But why she didn't have it was the

miracle. As rotten as his father had been. The years of living with his rottenness. Of sleeping with it. No, she did not have it, the tests said. But it could be there. Down in some secret chamber of any one of them. Dormant. Waiting. Yet alive. In her. In him. In his sister.

His sister was the one you would think 'would have the fear, he thought. But she didn't. She was about to be married and it didn't seem to bother her in the least. And certainly did not bother Old Pete at all marrying her off. Even if she did give birth to a couple of idiots. No, it certainly didn't bother Old Pete. ,

Slowly he began to dress, slowing down even more than he wished now that he realized that he had stalled long enough that he was sure to be late.

'Pier-roo, Pier-roo,' he heard his mother call from the hallway in her heavily Greek-accented English. 'Pouliki mou, dolly mou, hurry now. You not keep your Uncle Peterr waiting.'

'Yes, Mother. I've been doing my exercises, dear. I'll be along,' he said in that soft, refined voice of his. With his eastern schooling and two years abroad, he spoke with a polished, Eastern American accent; that typical, acquired Ivy League inflection of voice that was as much a part of the better-Eastern-schooled lad as were his dress and his manners.

'Tha's a good boy.'

It was the third time she had reminded him since Old Pete had called. The Patriarch had spoken. Well, Pierro wouldn't worry her by being late. He'd take his time on the way. "

He did not take a cab or his car, an old thirty-eight Ford, over to Lou Duck's. He did not take the cab because of the expense. And he did not take the car because of the expense in case he could not find a parking space and would have to go to a lot. Pierro Stratton felt that he would need every cent that he had saved during the war to fulfill his plans. Because somehow he was sure that his days of touching Old Pete were over, and even if they were not the demands that Pete would make in lieu of any financial advances would be more than he could afford.

When he arrived at Lou Duck's Silver Saddle Restaurant a half hour late Old Pete was sitting in the corner booth of

the bar with Lou Duck himself. He walked over and as he approached the booth, caught Old Pete's eye. At once Pierro knew that he had made a damn fool of himself again with the old man. He had expected him to be late. And of course had reacted accordingly.

They said hello around.

Then Old Pete told him to go over to the bar and wait, that he and Lou were discussing some important confidential business, that he would join him shortly.

Which he did not.

It was almost an hour. And Pierro knew no matter what Old Pete had on his schedule that afternoon, there would be retribution for Pierro being late, the schedule could go to hell, Pierro would have to wait.

A waitress came up to him and told him Mr Stratton was waiting in the corner booth. She was a small brunette, wide-eyed; the kind of babydoll manner that was the trademark of all Lou Duck's girls. Pierro said he would be right there.

He waited a moment, only a moment, then picked up his drink and walked to the back booth.

'How's the young fellow?' Old Pete said pleasantly as he sat down.

'Fine, thank you, Uncle Peter,' he said, giving the Peter a little more 'r' than usual.

'I've got trouble, Pierro. Lots of troubles,' Old Pete said almost plaintively, mournfully. 'I'm not as young as I use to be. I'm worried about Nick. About Mary. About you and your sister and your mother. About business. Here I am up in years, when I ought to be taking it easy, and what am I doing? Working. Slaving. I got to have help.

'This is a great opportunity for you, kid. We might have a little recession. Then good times, kid. The best times this country ever had. Even better than the days when I use to have the club. Better than that. A great new prosperous America.

'There has to be. We need homes. Buildings. More space for more people. We have to build. Build. Build.'

My God, Pierro wondered, I wonder where he stole that last speech. That certainly doesn't sound like Old Pessimistic Pete. He must have gone and rejoined the Executive's Club.

'And that's where you come in. The country needs ar-

chitects. More than ever before the country needs architects,' Old Pete said banging his fist down on the table again. 'Y'ou're a lucky kid. You got the big chance. I'd like to have a chance like you got when I was a kid. I'd like to have had that chance.

'Why only today I had lunch with Lawrence Green. He said you got a hell of a chance. He wants to see you. You ought to go in and see him. It won't hurt. And that man can do a lot for you. And I'll help. Even Lou Duck said he'd give you a few jobs on a couple of places he's got. To help you get started.'

So it was Lawrence Green that gave Old Pete the material for his speech.

'I talked to Lou Duck a few days after I was back, Uncle,' Pierro said. He was putting the cigarette out now, without having dragged on it once, but still had made no move to clean the ashes from the table, Pete noticed irritably.

'Lou Duck doesn't want an architect. He wants a draughtsman. Besides, he doesn't even want to pay what an average draughtsman should make. I'm not interested in draughting,' Pierro said softly, slightly amused again now that he had re-thought of the proposition Lou Duck had offered. It was so damn ridiculous. 'I'm an architect, Uncle. I didn't win a World Fellowship because I was an average one, either. If all I was interested in was building buildings and making money I'd have taken that proposition that Holabard & Root offered.'

'Holabard & Root offered *you* a job?' Old Pete asked incredulously.

'I received several letters from them while overseas and had lunch with Mr Root only last week,' Pierro said, stroking his right moustache. 'It was a very generous offer.'

'Are you crazy,' Old Pete said staring at Pierro incredulously. 'You crazy? That's one of the biggest firms in America. My God,' Old Pete slapped his hands to the sides of his head. He shook the head as if he were a fighter throwing off a punch. 'What the hell's wrong with you?'

'I told you I have ideas of my own about architecture.'

Pierro could see the reddish tinge of frustration that was now on the distinguished face of Pete Stratton.

'Well,' Pete said taking a deep breath, talking now in that

tired resigned-to-his-fate voice, the very same voice he had used on the phone earlier that day with Mary. 'Well, what are you going to do?'

Pierro didn't have the heart to tell him, not now, that he intended to use what money he had left from the fellowship to go to Bloomfield Hills, Michigan and work on the Paris project. He just couldn't tell him now. Though, God, how he knew how much better it would be to tell him now. To get it over with. Especially now that he had tipped his hand to Old Pete. There were so many goddamn ways Pete would play on you. He would use Pierro's mother against him. And his wife Mary. Anything. Anybody. For God's sake tell him.

'I don't know, Uncle. I have to go to the hospital a few more times in the next month. I've been doing some work on a project at home. I'd like to think about it a while longer. Make sure I don't make a mistake,' Pierro said almost ashamed of the pleasure he had gotten in saying it, then the shame gone when he saw the satisfaction, the relief, the sudden-giving-of-life, to the countenance of Old Pete Stratton.

'Now you're talking sense. Give it some thought. Your whole life is ahead. You ought to think about it. I knew you had some sense. Goddamn it, I always knew it,' Pete said reaching into his inner pocket for his chequebook. He set the chequebook on the table as the drinks came. He began to write out a cheque.

'Here's two-fifty.' He handed Pierro the cheque. 'Take it easy. Have some fun. I wouldn't even work for a while. Think it over, kid. Like you said: Think it over. You'll never regret it. I'll tell you that.'

Pierro took the cheque and unbuttoned his right breast pocket and put it into the pocket.

'Thank you, Uncle,' he said. What the hell, why not take it. Only a damn fool wouldn't take it. Old Pete would have taken it certainly if the tables had been turned. Besides, Pierro said to himself, I've made up my mind. It's about time somebody beat him for a few dollars. Damn well about time.

'Well,' Pete said picking up his drink. 'God Bless You, and Happy Days'

Pierro picked up his drink. 'God Bless You, Uncle,' he said

softly, almost affectionately. 'Happy Days to you, too,' he said sincerely. 'And many happy years.'

The warmth, the sincerity of Pierro's voice now void of any trace of snobbishness penetrated Pete Stratton. And a welling sad, but gratifying emotion tingled in the old man's belly for a moment. He swallowed deeply as the emotion spread through him.

'God Bless You, Pierro,' he said with tears in his eyes. Oh, God, he was a good kid. The world was really good. Man was good. Pete Stratton was good. Oh, if man only could be like this more. Feel the goodness that he felt. And the sadness because some day he would have to leave all this goodness. The goodness he loved, and tried to promote, and give the world more of. 'God Bless You,' he said again dramatically, crying fully now. He sipped his drink. Pierro sipped. Old Pete took a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose and wiped his eyes holding the gold-rimmed glasses shakingly in his left hand, honestly shaking from the emotion he had spent.

Chapter Six

NICK STRATTON's train was due in Chicago at ten-forty that night. Strangely, it was on time. From the Twelfth Street Station, primarily because of his excess baggage, he took a cab to the Blackstone Hotel where the clerk was curt and emphatic about the room shortage; no rooms.

He checked his baggage with the doorman and started up Michigan Avenue towards the Loop. It was a fine June night with a soft fresh-from-night wind from the Lake and an abundance of stars in the sky; the familiar smell of the Lake and the city and the wide of the Avenue and the traffic, the yellow and greenchecker cabs racing up the Avenue, all as familiar and real as he had dreamed they would be. The scent of the Lake, the scent he could never quite recollect, was as familiar and real as if he had never left — what was behind — the blood and the death and the

glory, the glory that he had believed in and that he had been promised but never found, were already it seemed but a part of a distant apparition. That fresh scent kindled once again all the boyhood dreams and hopes and ambitions and desires.

And out there suddenly to the west he saw in his mind a vast panorama of the land, the flat land sloping gently downward for miles from the edges of the city toward the Fox River valley and the tall corn growing between the city and the river, and the ducks on the river; the tall green corn and the manicured lawns of the gentleman farmer estates out near St Charles, where the land near the river suddenly dipped and rolled, and the earth was black rich from the river. And suddenly the fall and the stacks of wheat, the rough edge trenches of the corn fields, the stiff abandoned stalks, and the colour all colour of a cluster of trees; the sudden crispness of the first cold night coming quickly darkly in the late afternoon and with the darkness the strange melancholia of fall. Then the overcast of the sky, the snow, the big house in Winnetka and the fireplace, the big stone fireplace and the log burning slowly in the winter as the snow clusters gathered on the window; and you and your sister and the collie in front of the fire and the pillows on the floor, you reading to her Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Would she remember that you had stolen from Byron to call her your black eyed darling.

he was home

there was a barren hill and on top of the hill was a monastery there were huge rocks on the hill and a road twisting up the hill and goats grazing and it was Italy in the fall halfway up the hill on the road was an ambush from behind the big rocks and Jerry died in your arms all six foot seven of Jerry his hands between his legs where his testicles should have been say goodbye to my wife but for Gods sake dont tell her this for Gods sake Nick and save your goddamn morphine youll need it before you get out of this

he was home

there was snow a foot deep that was dry and whiter than any he had ever seen and dry cold and gray overhead and they had not seen the sky in days in this the north of Greece and there were no trees except the lone tall dead tree near

the crest of one hill they could see in the distance only the hills and the white snow and the blackpowder smoke of the artillery and his own blood in the snow and Boomer dragging him through the snow leaving a trail of redness and Boomer telling him later on how he Nick had laughedcried hysterically laughedcried as Boomer dragged him I'm-tinkling-red-in-the-snow

he was home

there were hills always hills and somehow it seemed someone else was always on the hills

it was hot and wet and the green of the jungle sweated as a man sweats and for days there had been only rain and the earth was a blanket of ooze and ontop of the hill was a village and it took three days to get the two hundred yards from the stream bed to the crest of the hill and the village abandoned except for Scottie's body tied to a post and the vultures sat ontop of the bashas and watched as you cut him down what was left and remembered the fine flavour of his accent and the night you had stolen the jeep together in Calcutta and he had shot up the mirrors in the lobby of the Great Eastern Hotel and it took you two days to find him and when you did married to a halfcaste whore and you did not know whether to mails his letter to his real wife in Wales or not

on the Avenue they did not know

there were sand dunes down by the Lake and in the late summer the week before they were to start fresh football they had a war with BB guns in the dunes which was not for real and this time he had the hill by himself and they were attacking him up the sand hill and his BB hit the Jew kid Wizenburg in the eye and blinded him and there wasn't anything he could do that would make the eye see again

So they had trained him for it. They did not know it and he did not know it but they had trained him for it. They had all worked on it together: the joke was that none of them knew they had been working on it.

Two paratroopers winging down the Avenue saluted him briskly.

Maybe now I can get rid of the guilt of Wizenburg's eye, he thought. Maybe I can convince myself, he half-laughed sardonically to himself, that because of the eye he was kept

out of the war and probably, by now, has made a lot of money which was his only ambition anyhow. No more guilt: I saved Wizenburg's life because he certainly would have died or at least been maimed had I not blinded him.

He would take a cab to the Blackstone and bribe the clerk. By God he was going to stay at the Blackstone. The clerk would not give him a room. He went to the manager after talking to and tipping the bell captain. The manager did not have a room but a suite, he said. Twenty-five a day. He took the suite.

It was one o'clock when he went up to the suite. In the suite the loneliness began to return. He looked out the window at the lights of the cars on the outer drive across the park, and saw the moonglow on the Lake, and with the music of the radio playing softly the loneliness became so unbearable that he knew he would not be able to sleep. From his duffle bag he took a bottle and poured a huge shot, then went out.

Hy Dennis ran the Four Winds. He'd go there. Hy would not say anything about Nick being in town. Those kind of guys never said anything about anybody.

He got in a cab: 'How's the Four Winds going?' he asked the driver.

'It blasts, soldier. But it's a little early for over there.'

'How about the Chez? Who's there?'

'Durante, I think.'

'The Chez,' Nick said. Well, there went that part of his plan: going to places where he might run into someone. You spend twenty-five a day for a suite at the Blackstone so you won't be in a neighbourhood where you might run into someone you know, then blithely, only two hours after you've been in town, get into a cab and blithely say 'the Chez' where you are liable to run into half the people you know in this city. •

They pulled up in front of the Chez. Durante wasn't there. It was Joe E. Lewis. Well he was better anyhow. At least for my dough. Joe E., Old Pete's pal from the old days. He took the elevator upstairs. It was crowded. He went through the smoke dark of the thickly richly red-carpeted main room that had fewer soldiers and sailors in it than any room he had been in years. The show was not on but the dance floor

was charged crowded and the band was playing a rumba. He went to the bar.

The headwaiter had not recognized him. In the bar he ordered a scotch. There was a civilian standing next to him at the bar. He was obviously a salesman and when Nick noticed that he was in a conversational mood Nick turned away abruptly. His scotch came. For a few minutes he did not touch it. Damn it, there was no reason to belt now.

The bar was glassed in from the main room. He saw Mike Trezel, the owner of the Chez, come walking through the bar; sixty-ish, tall, thin, sombre, the familiar long Havana in his mouth as he greeted his guests. He had not changed. Nick stared at him wondering if Mike would recognize him. Certainly *Mike* would. Mike had come to their house at least once every month ever since Nick could remember. Mike passed him. Nodded. He had not recognized him. God, Nick thought, do I look that bad. That old. He turned to the bar mirror running his hand over the scar on his cheek.

He drank half his drink slowly then went to the men's room. In the men's room he ran into Jack Lombard who was a neighbour of theirs when they lived in Wilmette before they moved to Winnetka.

'Aren't you Nick Stratton?' Jack asked.

'Sorry,' Nick said. 'You must have me mixed up with someone.'

'God, boy, you look enough like him to be his twin. Maybe a little older. His brother.'

'Sorry,' Nick turned around.

After that he decided to leave. Christ, he didn't have to lie about who he was. He didn't have anything to be ashamed of. He went back to the bar and finished his drink and paid.

He came onto Rush Street; the street where the cabbies brought the conventioners and at the same time collected from the management of wherever they had dumped their load. The cabbies no longer getting so much a load but taking a lesson from the Reuthers and the Becks now collected so much a head.

Rush Street was neon lit like a small town on a weekday shopping night and the traffic was just as heavy with bustling smalltown men in their too-tight suits and overly

starched collars laughing and joking those titillating laughs and jokes that seemed to erupt out of men that had not been out of town away from their wives for a length of time. They were never the same then as when you met them alone, Nick knew. But together you might say they were almost alone because somehow their personalities became lost within themselves and out of this mass of personalities a new personality emerged non-dominated by any one single personality; self-directing, self-relying, independent of all of them.

This was the street. Rush. With its hundred dollar broads and ninety cents for a half-ounce of diluted drink. And its show broads and hat-check broads and chippies who would sit at your table and drink with you and talk to you about things that made your palms sweat and your loins ache and drink like no woman you had ever seen in the wide world and if they did not get all your money that way would get it later after the spot closed one way or other whoever you were you would certainly be as primed and overripe ready as you ever could be. It was a goddamn art in a way.

The Four Winds was one of the better places catering to stockmarket brokers, gamblers, politicians of stature, professional men, high-class call girls, upper bracket entertainers, playboys and playgirls. It was a tropically decorated place with a piano that never banged; thatched walls, oil-on-velvet paintings of nude Tahitian girls and a ceiling of palm grass giving the feeling of a native roof.

They would not let him in because he was in uniform. He told the doorman to get Hy Dennis which he did after Nick had waited almost ten minutes in the entranceway, which was not a bad wait considering the view he had of what was coming in and going out.

Then he saw little Hy coming towards him as round and bald and redfaced as ever.

'Well,' Nick said.

Hy studied him perplexedly for a moment, an almost embarrassed perplexity. Then: 'For God's sake, Nick. Nick Stratton.'

'Hello, Hy,' Nick said slowly.

They shook hands warmly, Hy noticing the sad old warmth of Nick's smile, a smile he had never seen Nick wear before.

'What kind of a place you running?' Nick asked in a new voice.

'The Mayor, on demand of the Mothers of American Soldiers, put out a proclamation. We're supposed to protect your virtue. The law I can handle. But not that many mothers. So I put up the rope. Come on in, kid, you look great.'

'I look like hell.'

'Rough? eh? Nickie.'

'Nice. Lovely. Paris in the spring. The Mediterranean in the summer,' Nick said. 'No, Hy, nothing like I thought it would be. Certainly not glamorous.'

They went up to the crowded now standingroom only bar, Hy leading Nick by the arm.

'Scotch,' Nick said.

'The usual,' Hy said.

For a place that wasn't supposed to get going until really late it was a very crowded place, Nick thought.

'When did you get back?' Hy asked.

'Tonight.'

'How's the family?'

'I haven't seen them. You know, Hy. It was late and they weren't expecting me. If I went out there late they'd get all excited and we'd be up talking all night. I thought I'd stay downtown tonight. After three years, Hy, one night doesn't make much difference.'

'I guess not,' Hy said. 'I hear Old Pete is going great with the theatres.'

'That's what I hear,' Nick said with such obvious unconcern that his concern and irritation at the very mention of Old Pete came through. He looked around the bar. 'American women sure look nice.'

He did not see anyone he knew but was conscious of several people staring at him; probably, he thought, because he was the only one in the place in uniform. Hy had turned and was talking to one of his captains, then turned back again.

'On leave, Nick? Discharge?'

'It's a kind of tour of duty to my home address. Not leave, really. I've got the points for a discharge, though,' Nick raised his scotch glass in a salutary gesture.

'Good luck, Nickie,' Hy said in that sincere way of his.

They drank.

'Where's your ribbons?'

'Not me, boy. I went through that in New York. What's this one for, Major? And that one, Major? And that red one would look better in the top row, Major.'

'You get hit?'

'Hy, you going to stand there and look at my face and ask me if I got hit,' Nick grinned.

'Your face ain't bad.' Hy said. 'Your nose is flattened a little. And that scar. It's that moustache and grey hair. You look old, Nick.'

Nick sipped on his drink. There was a different kind of animated excitement in this room, he felt. With no soldiers, no sailors, and no curfew, the war seemed suddenly again distant and far behind him, his home far away from him. There was however an underlying provocative kind of suggestiveness exuding prey-like, filling him with a kind of fearful excitation that he could not let go of as similarly he could not let go of it before battle began. But here no one was being killed.

God Bless America. And V for Victory.

He was standing between two stools and now the man on the stool to his right got up revealing on the stool next to him a striking brunette. She had on a simple black dress, a diamond wristwatch which was unmistakably very expensive and on her little finger wore an emerald and diamond cocktail ring. Sitting there, her finely proportioned legs crossed longly, wearing no hat, around twenty-five years old, she exuded a poise far beyond her years, it seemed.

She sipped on her drink and set down. Her eyes began to wander just as you would expect them to wander then suddenly met his own gaping eyes. She smiled politely, did not even abruptly turn her head away, just politely and graciously and darkly with no trace of flirtatiousness or hint of sensuality or sexuality, just smiled pleasantly.

To Nick it was a startling experience. No one had ever smiled at him quite like that before. He turned away. He did not usually turn away from an attractive woman, and especially if she smiled at him; but the graciousness, the kindness, that she had extended to him made him suddenly feel her superiority as a human being; and being the way he

was he would repay her graciousness and kindness by not staring of gaping or embarrassing her with some kind of an approach.

You never approached a woman like that in the right way anyhow. They had the axe over you not only because you wanted that which was the ultimate goal of your attraction but because you admired them for the control they had over themselves, the practical way they ran their lives, the attributes you did not have. So that by the time you did approach them you were so cognizant of your own shortcomings and imperfections merely by being in the same vicinity of such serenity and faultlessness, that you felt you were stepping out of your league.

After the contest, whichever way it went, Nick knew, the party was over. Any way you looked at it, whether she beat you down or pulled you up, she had won. Then if she wanted to sleep with you, you knew somehow that it wasn't going to be like it could have been had it worked right to begin with. She had beaten you, she felt guilty about having beaten you, and so she slept with you. Either that or if you had to have it so bad with her that you listened to her every word, and made her think that you believed her every word, which if you wanted it that bad Nick Stratton you would have forced yourself to believe every word, then again you would not be going to bed with a woman but with a goddamn mother that was giving her most obedient child a present.

Either way it only led to one thing: Because you somehow knew that you had been given a present, a compensation of a kind, your male vanity would suffer such a severe blow that you would be bound and determined no matter what the cost to go back again and again until you got it in that fine idealistic way commensurate with the dignity of man, and particularly your own dignity. Only then, after you had had it your way, could she possibly understand what you really were.

He finished his drink and slyly out of the corner of his eye watched her long sensuous white fingers perfectly kept circle around the stinger glass. Somehow, though, she was different from the kind of woman he had been thinking about. It was obvious, looking at her again, that she didn't belong in any specific category. She wasn't married, her ring

finger said. And the man who had been sitting next to her had left. She was probably waiting to meet someone, or maybe she lives in the neighbourhood in one of those town houses and couldn't sleep: so she took a walk and decided to have a drink. Well, you'd sure as hell think that someone like her would pick another place besides this one. Certainly if she lived around here she'd know about *this* place.

She leaned forward to sip her drink and he became acutely aware of a sudden excitement as her profile showed her fine breasts delicately accentuated by the sheer delicateness of the expensive fabric pressed ever so slightly up against the bar. He quickly took a drink of his own, then looked back at her and she smiled at him just the way she had the first time, politely and graciously, with no trace of flirtatiousness or hint of sensuality or sexualness. He half-smiled back an almost awkward smile.

Hy walked up between them. 'Hello, Nora,' he said to her. 'Meet Nick Stratton. An old friend home from the wars tonight.'

Standing there Nick took her now extended hand and she said, 'How do you do, Major.' And she had said it so graciously and so politely with such sincerity that she made him feel suddenly perfectly at ease; almost an equal really.

'Join us for a drink, Nora?' Hy asked.

She would, she said, but not another drink just yet.

She talked to Hy for a few moments regarding a mutual friend of theirs who was sick, cancer they thought, in Miami. And then Hy told her that Nick had only that night returned from three years overseas and was spending the night in town, as he had arrived late. And told her that he was the son of Old Pete Stratton who once ran The Mill out on the north side, certainly she had heard of Old Pete, Hy said. She had. Everybody knew who he was, she said. But she did not say it, Nick thought, with any noticeable change in her attitude towards him as most people did when he was referred to as Old Pete's son. In fact she was so damn gracious about it that Nick hardly felt the usual blind moment of anger and inferiority and (though he did not know it) probably jealousy, and hate and exasperation that he usually felt when he was referred to as Old Pete's son. Nevertheless he was suddenly infuriated with Hy for having mentioned it. And

when Nick was that way he couldn't hide it, it seemed it had to come out right then and there.

Scowling, his drink in his hand, he looked down at Hy, who was a good four inches shorter than he: 'Let's forget Old Pete,' he said with a deliberate and forced emphasis; mouth quivering slightly and jaw set. 'All' right, Hy?' he said, deliberately and sarcastically.

Hy eyed him for a moment, the round jolly slightly freckled face as jovial and unmoved as when he had first greeted Nick, eyed him with those small almost beady blue eyes that were as void of emotion as a two-day dead Japanese soldier, then turned to the bartender. 'Another round. And no cheque for the Major tonight. Have a good time, Nick. I'll see you in a while.' He nodded to Nora and walked away.

Nora was studying him; the animalistic glare of his eyes as they followed Hy away, the taut bunched force of the shoulders showing through the OD shirt, the angered swelling of the veins in his thick neck. He drank, his eyes still piercingly following Hy away, wiped his moustache with the back of his hand. For a moment she thought he was going to spit, then suddenly he set the glass down on the bar and turned to her.

'Sorry,' he said to her, not looking at her, saying it, she thought, not as if he really meant it but as if it was something that he should say.

She smiled graciously, amusedly.

He leaned over resting his left arm on the bar, ordered himself another drink, and looked at her, the anger having completely dissipated the inferiority that she had made him feel at first, and now not really caring whether he impressed her or made her or not. He had already irritably decided that he was going to get drunk. Real drunk. Dead drunk. Just like the dead drunk the night before he had sailed from Bombay. That goddamn Hy. The little Jew bastard with his Irish name, and his 'no cheque for the Major'. They always beat you one way or other. Just stood there all shut-up and then with one lick managed to beat you.

'You live in town,' he asked her.

'Across the Avenue. On Scott,' she said.

'You've got a nice tan.'

'I should have,' she said. 'I was in Florida until about six weeks ago. Where did you come from?'

'All over. From France now. I was out in the Far East. Then I went back to France.'

'That's unusual, isn't it?'

'I guess. I was on a boat from Bombay through the Canal and the Straits. I had some wounds that began to bother me. So they dropped me off at Malta and flew me to a hospital in France. I couldn't have planned it any better,' Nick said suddenly smiling inwardly as he remembered how Boomer had feigned his own illness so that he could get off the boat with Nick. That was a real Award performance, Nick remembered, Boomer faking his appendix which had been out for seven years and telling the shipdoctor that the scar was a shrapnel wound. 'Would you like that drink now?' he asked her.

'I think so.'

He ordered.

'Divorced?' he asked her.

'My husband's dead,' she said without trace of dramatics.

'The war?'

'No, not in the war.'

'Have I ever met you before? I think I have,' he lied.

'You didn't go to Notre Dame by chance.'

'Sorry, why?'

'I knew someone that looked like a younger version of you there. I went to St Mary's.'

'That's where my little sister wants to go,' he said. And looked down at the drink in his hand and as he did so catching a quick glimpse of the long leanness of her crossed legs, feeling at once a sudden disturbance; then craftily faked a shake of his glass as if to stir his drink and caught one more glimpse. 'You're Catholic then?'

'Bastard Catholic, you might say,' she said.

'I wish I could say bastard like that. When I say it it sounds vulgar.'

'I can imagine,' she smiled momentarily, then laughed a full delicious laugh.

He took another drink, then another, feeling the drink and the excitement too, a strange excitement exclusively suited to her; then thinking again of what Hy had said: Not

Nick. Not Nick Stratton. But Old Pete's son. Old Pete's building; Old Pete's theatre; Old Pete's church; and Old Pete's wife. Not Mary Stratton; no, not even that. Old Pete's wife and Old Pete's son. Maybe, he thought abruptly, that's why I liked the Army, wanted to stay in it. Because there at least I had as much identity as the next person, was maybe an expendable identity, but at least it was Nick Stratton that was expendable. Not Old Pete's son. Though God knows had he been expended it would not have been the loss of Nick Stratton back here. It would have been Old Pete's loss: 'Did you hear? Old Pete's kid got it.' Nick wasn't dead. Only Old Pete's kid; the anger had mounted fully again and Nora saw the blood pounding redly in the thick veins of his neck and the slight sardonic twist of his lips.

'Excuse me,' Nick said. 'I'll be right back.' And started for the men's room.

Her eyes followed him as he walked his determined bear-like walk away, his head bowed his body bent slightly forward as if he were packing something on his back, walking with a kind of angry rush, until he vanished into the crowd.

Hy came up to her: 'He's only a kid, Nora.'

'A pretty big kid,' she said.

'Well, he hasn't got anything. At least if I know Old Pete he hasn't.'

'I just want to have some fun, Hy.'

'You're sure?'

'I'm not working for a few days. That trip Cindy and I took to Hot Springs with those eggheads from New York turned out all right.'

'Yeh, I heard about that.'

'It was hardly worth it,' she half-laughed a fatalistic, cynical little laugh. 'I won't hurt him. We'll have some fun, maybe. I need to have some fun - don't tell him?' she asked. 'All right, Nora. But take it easy. You know how those kids are when they've just come home.'

'No, I don't. But maybe I'll let you know,' she saluted him with her drink.

Hy chuckled. 'Have fun,' he said. 'If you change your mind, there's a doctor friend of mine in the dining room who would like to meet you.'

'I don't like doctors, Hy. I mean that kind of doctors.'

He walked away, his round red face as void of emotion as if he had just gotten up from a ten hour sleep, his mind, however, a whirlpool of vivid recollections of the few years ago when he himself had fallen in love with Nora, had even wanted to marry her after over forty years of bachelorhood, had practically begged her to marry him.

That was after her husband had died, when she first began to come in, before she had gone to the sanitarium, and only a little while before she had completely dissipated the seventy-five thousand he had left her. As much as he had fallen for her and wanted her, he told himself again, it was a damn fortunate thing that she wouldn't marry him considering what had happened to her in the years after that up until now. Well, you can't win them all, he said to himself with his gambler's philosophic attitude, and there ain't no use in crying about what you've blown, 'cause what you've blown is really only a figure on the percentages, which eventually must be put down anyhow if you are ever going to win again.

Hy stopped by the entranceway and chatted for a moment with several members of a departing party, then turned and looked back at the bar. He could see Nick arguing with the bartender as he had expected him to argue with him. Outwardly Hy's round face was an emotionless mask, but inwardly he was smiling. He walked over.

'What's the trouble, Nick.'

'I can buy my own drinks,' Nick said. 'I'll take the first one. But it isn't right, you buying all the drinks,' he persisted. He was holding a twenty in his hand.

'What the hell,' Hy said, 'you don't come home from a war every day. I'll make it back on you.'

'Keep your money, Nick,' Nora said. 'You might not get this chance again for a long time.'

Nick stared at her for a second, then looked back at Hy. Then Nick put the twenty in his pocket, pulled out a ten, set the ten on the bar: 'For the bartender,' he said to Hy half triumphantly.

'Thanks Nick,' Hy said.

'Thank you, Major,' the bartender said.

'We're going down to the South Side and hear some music,' Nora said to Hy.

'Spade music?' Hy asked.

'The Little Celebrity Club,' she said. 'I thought Nick would like that.'

'Thanks for the drinks, Hy,' Nick said with satisfaction and a still slight edge of triumph.

'Good night,' Nora said.

And Hy watched them walk away: The kid officer with the monkey on his back and the five hundred dollar call girl from the steel mill districts of Gary: What a generation this had turned out to be. Jazz. Rhythm. Beat. And war. And no longer days to remember, only days to forget. The frenzy and the easy forget provided by the Jazz, Rhythm, Beat.

JAZZ, RHYTHM. BEAT. The Twentieth Century opium and alcohol, its sedative and purgative. And yet, Hy thought, we are still here.

Still living.

Still existing.

Still prospering.

Miracles, he half laughed to himself. The Big Guy never pulled no miracles like this one. He turned and started for the kitchen. He began to laugh inwardly. Water into wine? compared to this, this . . . maybe, he thought in that inarticulate way he had of approaching religion, maybe the Big Guy's still in action but ain't letting on.

Somebody had to be going for them all . . . Somebody had to be.

Chapter Seven

NORA and Nick took a cab to the South Side. The Little Celebrity Club was on South Michigan in the core of the black belt one flight down in the basement of an old brownstone three story house in a district that had, during World War I, been exclusively upper middle class white.

The small club was jam packed tight with coloured sports in all their long draped finery and their bleached blonde

mulattoes, and their dyed red-haired mulatto women, their young almost teenage white women and their older more sophisticated richly groomed white women. There were few soldiers or sailors in uniform but Nick knew that there were probably many soldiers and sailors that were not in uniform.

There were five in the combo and a blackfat whitesmiling overlymadeup overlyjeweled vocalist in a green satin dress blasting: 'Hey daddie I want a diamond ring, bracelets, everything . . . Daddie . . . Daddie . . .'

The crowd was stomping their feet with a wild rhythmic exaltation; exhilarating and primitively contagious.

'Daddie . . .'

The crowd interjecting:

'Yeah Daddieeee' 'One mo time, babbieeee . . . Jus one mo time.' Vocalist: 'I want a diamond ring, bracelets, everything' And a roar from the crowd: 'Mo.' 'Once mo.'

And they took off again.

Nora knew the owner. At the least the co-owner; the truly stabilizing factor of the business, Nora had said. Her name was Bobbie: a middle twentyish mulatto woman with almost perfect Aryan features, red haired and shiny brown-skinned with the most provocatively sentient long hands Nick had ever seen, accentuated by extremely long and well kept silver polished nails.

There were tables around the small dance floor in the low ceilinged room and booths along the wall in back. Nora suggested they take a booth where, she said, if they hollered at each other in moderately loud voices they might be able to communicate. They ordered.

The bigfat black woman was still whitely singing 'Hey Daddie,' but a little louder now, and the combo was playing a little louder, the stomping more rhythmic and more in unison. They had their drink which was very mild. They drank quickly, then ordered another; a double this time. Finally the combo took a break. The gay room of revellers was very up now, very high, even though the music had stopped. It was several minutes before Nick could hear the lone pianist who had relieved the combo.

'This is one place that I missed out here,' Nick said.

'They go on until ten or eleven in the morning sometimes,' Nora said. There was an animation in her eyes now that she

hadn't had at the Four Winds, and excited restlessness in her voice. Then her eyes began to wander and Nick was watching her, wanting suddenly to put his hand in her hair which was cut short, cropped, in a feather cut, which was the vogue. In the murky, smoky light the dark hair glistened an almost metallic blue, and the waves lay coiled round naturally. Nick could not tell whether it was a meticulously groomed head or if it had been brushed carelessly without thought or effort.

'I used to come out around here all the time before the war,' he said to her. 'To see Lionel Hampton. In fact one night I had my picture taken with him. I was very proud of that picture. But I had to keep it hidden. You see, there was a coloured girl in the picture. Hampton's vocalist. And I was standing next to her. If my mother would have ever seen that . . .' he smiled as if to himself.

'I hardly knew my mother,' Nora said. 'Take a look at that, Nick,' she motioned. Across the room near the bandstand there were two white couples formally attired. They were obviously society, or the very very rich attempting to crack society. They looked to be in their thirties. Both women wore white ermine wraps and were very elegant but could not hide their boredom or remoteness or vast sense of superiority behind their forced smiles. To Nick they looked for all the world like the Russian aristocracy out to see a rabble terrorist strung by the neck.

'I don't like that band,' Nora said.

'I wonder how those bastards stayed out of the Army,' Nick said.

'I wonder what they'd do in it,' Nora joked; knowing from the rigid, calculated tone of Nick's last statement that he was becoming angered again.

Looking at her he was forced to laugh.

'I never thought of that.'

The piano player was singing now:

'I'm going down to St James Infirmary . . . saw my babie there . . . laid out on a long white table . . . so cold . . . so sweet . . . and so bare.'

A tall thin Negro came over to the table. Nick recognized him as the clarinet player. He had a small neatly trimmed moustache, wore sunglasses, and his black knit tie was hugely knotted. He said hello to Nora, then was introduced to Nick.

Without invitation he floated down into a chair at their table.

'Man,' he said, 'I had to come over. I never sat at no table with no officer. And this was my chance.' His name, Nora explained to Nick, was Woodie. It was not Woodie because he played the clarinet but because his name was Woodrow Wilson Jones. He had very feminine hands and a feminine high-pitched voice.

'What outfit?' Nick asked.

'I trained down in Georgia,' Woodie said. 'But I didn't last so long. They say my morals and the army's morals they in in conflict. And they is. Thank God fo' that. I lasted sixty-one days and tha's sixty-one days too long.'

It was quite obvious listening to the slow way he talked and the slow easy way he motioned, that he was high. Nora touched Nick's leg lightly, warningly. The waitress came over. Nick did not order a drink for Woodie or for them.

'Is you one of those tough Majors?' Woodie asked. 'You look like one of them tough Majors.'

Nick looked over at Nora for a moment. She was smiling. She did not seem perturbed at being imposed upon. Nick noticed how fine her deep tan was, and the way the tiny crows' feet spread out from the corners of her eyes.

Bobbie came up: 'What you doin,' Woodie, moving in on people like this,' she said to him. 'You actin' like one of them black southern niggers. Go on. Get. Can't you see these people want to be alone.'

'It's all right,' Nick said half-heartedly.

'That's all right, Major. You don't have to be polite. Not to this one. He always say he's a white Negro. He don't know what he is . . . Get,' she said to Woodie.

Woodie began to laugh a kind of nit-wit laugh, a drooling, oafish laugh. Standing up loosely Woody dumped his arm over sideways in a salutary farewell gesture, the arm so lax it appeared to be boneless, then grinning widely floated away.

Bobbie watched him, chuckled a motherly little chuckle, then burst out laughing slapping her knee. 'All I can say is it's a good thing he blows that reed the way he does,' she said smiling that beautiful white Aryan smile, with absolu-

tely no trace of apology in the smile. Then she walked away, her buttocks swaying.

Nora and Nick were laughing too. They ordered again and the combo began to play. 'You got to kiss 'im in the mawning and kiss 'im in the night . . .

'Give him plenty of what you got and give it to him right . . .'

'Cause a good man nowadays is hard to find . . .'

Nora was intently watching the combo, and he was looking at her. She was enjoying herself, he could tell, and the music and the place were having their effect on her. He was holding her hand now and he could feel the warm bloodrush of her wrist vein against his, the steady and warm life-giving pulsation, feeling suddenly now the intensification of his own blood pounding in his veins against hers. They sat there hardly moving for several moments, then his eyes met hers and they said to each other, without saying, what can be said only with the secret implication of the eyes, all doubly augmented by the not saying aloud, the secret exciting subtlety of not having to say it. There were so many ways to blunder it by saying it aloud. And there was no need.

Their hands gripped tight.

'Go?' Nick whispered a restless suppressed whisper.

She nodded, slowly.

It was daylight out. The sun was bright, blinding bright after the light of the club. They took a cab to her apartment on Scott. They did not speak, and did not speak on the elevator. But when they were inside, in the comfortable and rich decor of her apartment she said she would make them a drink. They took the drink into her bedroom and while she went into her dressingroom he silently undressed down to his shorts, stood there silently drinking and waiting in the half-dark of the small-lamp light of the heavily richly draped room with its wide elegant Hollywood bed. She came out in a simple white negligee so sheer that he could see the tan of her body against the white of her body. He put the drink down and kissed her, opening up the robe and pushing it off her. It fell lightly to the floor, and his head sank down to her breasts. Then she was on the bed, and he on his knees by the side of the bed, tenderly touching the smooth brown-skin of her firm thighs, seeing the neat line of the brown-

skin as it turned to white, then a little while later he felt her quiver and moan, and later quiver again.

With no shame, no hesitation, only initially a careful and subtle exploration, done, it seemed, with a mutual consideration and aim to please — they made love twice. Her only complaint was of the bristle edge of his beard. He made them a drink and showered and shaved and came back.

She was sitting up in the bed with the drink in her hand, the sheet pulled up to her waist, her fine breasts pointedly exposed and contrastingly white against the tan of her shoulders and he could tell from the now half-serene half-womanliness of her eyes and the slight pensiveness of her smile that they were purposely exposed for him. He came over and sat on the edge of the bed, putting his left hand over her and resting it on the smoothskin indentation of the hollow above her hip. Silently, softly with a gentle motion she rested one hand up on the side of his neck, and slowly pensively her fingers moved forward and back and it was a wonder to him that she wanted him again, too.

Then together they showered and she got back in the bed, he sitting on the edge of the bed as before, and they sipped their drinks, not seeming to care at all of the time, and he asked her things about herself and she was slightly hesitant at first, but then she began to tell him.

She told him of her childhood days which had been spent in the steel mill district of Gary. Her father had run a small newsstand and notions store, she said, and her mother had died when she was nine. She had died in childbirth, Nora said, and her father had never married again and never quite recovered from the shock of his wife's sudden death. They were very poor in those, the depression years, but almost everyone was poor then; and she told him how at times, looking back, she would marvel at how they all had laughed and made jokes of their poverty.

Nora had sold newspapers on the streetcorners from the time she was nine. In the winter she had worn boys' corduroy pants because of the cold, and her father wouldn't let her wear her only winter coat unless it was below freezing.

'He had a thermometer outside the newsstand,' she half-smiled reminiscently. 'We lived over the store. In the mor-

nings, in the winter, I used to call down and ask him what the temperature was. If it was thirty-three — no overcoat. Dad was a set man. A bullhead really, Nick. But he always meant well as far as I was concerned.' •

'American?' Nick asked.

'Polish,' she said. 'My mother was French though. French-Canadian, actually. Dad migrated from a farm outside of Kiev. Actually you might say he was almost Ukrainian.'

Her makeup, which had been moderate to begin with, was completely gone now and Nick noticed the childlike quality of her face as she spoke.

Then abruptly, unexpectedly, Nick remembered Gary from the days when he was a small boy and Old Pete had taken him on trips to visit the theatres. They had had two theatres in Gary. And Nick had a second cousin, a Stratton, that lived there and was Nick's age. The boy's father owned a chili-burger stand and they lived on one of those garbage-strewn streets where all the houses were tall and narrow and wooden and covered with layers of soot from the millsmoke, each house an exact replica of the next, and packed as tightly together as a freshly opened pack of cigarettes.

'I went to St Rita's,' Nora was saying. 'I had swiped a sweat shirt from the boys' gym at St Ignatius across the street. That's what I sold newspapers in,' she said plaintively; perhaps ashamedly, Nick thought. 'That sweat shirt came almost down to my knees, and the other girls used to razz me about it. But it was so warm. I think I was only about eleven then.'

Nick smiled a wounded smile thinking for a moment of all the advantages that he had had, was now for a moment awkwardly ashamed that he had had those advantages, as he suddenly plainly visualized the beautiful child of her standing on the street corner in the cold ugly grey soot of Gary and hawking her papers. Gently he raised his hand and took hers and held it.

'How did you ever manage St Mary's?' he asked her.

'Well, to begin with, we were strict Catholics. Really strict, Nick.' He was still sitting on the edge of the bed and he lighted a cigarette for her and for himself. 'Dad had that immigrant urge to get me ahead. You know how that is. Of course he was always disappointed that I wasn't a boy, but

he still wanted to make the best of what he had. As the country grew out of the depression he prospered a little by selling numbers tickets on the side. He was very close with his money and saved. He was very close to the parish priests. Practically all the priest bought their papers and tobacco from my dad, and one of them had gone to Notre Dame. To my father Notre Dame was the epitome of life itself. His only real weakness was betting on Notre Dame at fantastic odds. Well, I couldn't very well go to Notre Dame and I guess the way he saw it St Mary's was about as close as you could get.

•
'I worked one year after I got out of high school and saved so I could have the proper clothes. But Dad had enough to send me through as well as most of the girls that were there. But it took every dime he had, and then some, I found out after he died.

'I learned a lot there. I mean about things that a young girl with my background would want to learn. And I studied hard. Not so much out of curiosity, I don't think, but more or less in payment to my father. He thought that what you really got out of a school like that was reflected in the grades you received.

'God, it's been ages since I've talked this much,' she said. 'How about some breakfast, Nick? Let me fix us some breakfast.'

'I was very lucky meeting you last night,' Nick said. 'Damn lucky,' he spoke softly. There was a kindness and tenderness in him now that she had recognized momentarily earlier in their love. But now she was more aware of it, and the contrast it was to the gruffness of his exterior; the tight wired way that he had been the night before, first at Hy's then again a little later at the Celebrity Club.

'How about it?'

'Well, I'll start out with some eggs if you can arrange that,' Nick said. 'I think I know what I'd like later, too,' he grinned lowering his eyes slightly from her eyes.

She laughed: 'I think that can be arranged.' She began to get out of the bed.

'You're some woman,' he said. 'You're spoiling me rotten.'

'I'd like to spoil you. Not rotten, though,' she said. 'There's some of my husband's pyjamas in that bottom drawer, if you

want.' She was slipping into the white negligee. 'And slippers in the closet.'

'Thanks,' he said. 'I'll just put on my pants if that's all right.'

'Feel at home, Nickie,' she came up to him and patted and kissed him, and then he held her and kissed her long and hard. And she left and went down the hallway towards the kitchen.

A few moments later Nick wandered out into the living room, replenished his still half-filled glass with fresh ice from the portable bar, and momentarily browsed. The living room had a very high ceiling compared to the hallway and bedroom. It was a richly furnished room thickly carpeted. It had an immediate effect; the effect of comfort and good taste in a conservative modern way. There was a long wide couch deeply soft and well pillowed, cheerfully brightly coloured in contrast to the plain carpet. And two large comfortable matching occasional chairs, covered in a rich chartreuse, and one wingback chair. There were bookshelves in the vacant wall areas and the studio windows were longly draped in a rich fabric that Nick could not identify but was immediately aware of its thick, expensive elegance. And at the end of the room was a marble fireplace and over the fireplace was an oil of Nora in a white strapless summer frock.

There was something about the painting that struck Nick as being immediately wrong, that he did not like, and he stood there a long while trying to place what it was. It was not in the eyes, as he had thought at first, though they might have something to do with the overall effect. The eyes in the painting were slightly green, not the real colour of her eyes, and they were narrower than they should have been. But it was in the mouth that the artist had apparently failed. There was something about the mouth that was slightly twisted in the painting, as if Nora had been chewing on something, or was hungry, or — he just couldn't place exactly what it was.

Standing there still searching the painting Nick began to feel the tiredness seep into him, felt the ache in the back of his legs, felt suddenly the weight of his spinal column and the effort to keep it straight, and knew that now too his mind, as his body, was tired and dull and not as quick as it should

be. Then from the kitchen he smelled the frying bacon and he was overcome by an almost ravenous hunger.

She served him in the small dining room off the living room. He ate his first plate of softly scrambled eggs and bacon hurriedly and she scrambled three more eggs for him. He consumed the eggs and altogether four slices of toast and three glasses of milk and did not feel overly filled. Then she served coffee and brandy.

It was really a very homey affair, Nick thought, as if they had known each other for years. Perhaps were even married. She took pleasure in serving him, he realized. But what struck him oddly was that it seemed the pleasure of a little girl who was playing house. He poured a little more Courvoisier into his coffee, feeling already the effect of the first brandy and coffee, and no longer feeling quite the tired ache in the back of his legs nor the weight of his spine. Then she motioned for a little more brandy in her cup.

'You drink well,' he said.

'I practice all the time,' she smiled that slightly plaintive little girl smile. The smile which horrified while it fascinated Nick; the way it so suddenly voided her of her womanliness. She sipped on her coffee. Then, in a serious, mature way: 'What are you going to do now, Nick?'

'Today?'

'No, silly,' she laughed. 'Today you're going to sleep. I mean now that you're home from the war.'

'I wish to Christ I knew,' he said. Then he went on to explain to her how he had been in the country for over a week and still hadn't notified his parents, and how it had been his intention not to go home for several days after he had arrived in Chicago, maybe not go home at all. He still could not explain the exact why of not wanting to go home, and she did not press the question and seemed in some way, he thought, to understand.

Then she told him how she had met her husband while visiting a school friend of hers in Chicago during the Christmas holidays her last year at St Mary's. He was an insurance broker, a friend of the girl's father, and considerably older than she. They were married right after commencement that year. She was twenty-one then and he was forty-three. He was fairly well-to-do and she had lived a good and not un-

happy life, unexciting, until he had died suddenly and unexpectedly a year and a half to the day after they had been married.

'Accident?' Nick asked.

'Heart attack,' she said her voice quivering slightly. She did not mention to him what had caused the heart attack and for a moment she thought she would become hysterical just thinking about it: thinking too of the sanitarium.

'A little brandy, please,' she asked Nick.

Quickly he poured it for her, and picked up her cup and held it for her while she drank.

'You tired?' he asked her.

'Oddly, no,' she said, recovering her composure remarkably quickly. 'Are you?'

'I ought to be, but I'm not either. Really.'

After that they went into the living room and had more coffee and brandy, listening to the radio and smoking, and they began to feel once again that strange attraction that as yet they had not been able to even partially gratify; the exciting way it was with them, he had decided later, not only because of the wanting-to-please but because neither seemed to have any fear of the wanting-to-take for the self, selfishly. That was what really had made it unusual, after they had made love once more ragingly on the living room couch.

After that they slept. When he woke up she was not there and he vaguely remembered having heard the phone ring. There was a note on the night stand. It had been written, it said, at four-thirty that afternoon. She had been called away unexpectedly and would be back around eight. And to be sure and wait. There was a key on the night stand in case he wanted to go out for a while.

Still sleepy, slightly hung over, he took another shower; cold this time. In the shower he vaguely recalled having half-heard her speaking to someone named Clare on the phone. And remembered Nora trying to get out of whatever it was, but finally she had agreed and said she would be over in half an hour. Or was it an hour. Then he wondered if he had really overheard the conversation, or if there had been one. Jumbled up as it was he decided to junk trying to recall whatever it was. Probably a dream.

Before they had gone to sleep they had agreed it was really

very foolish for Nick to be paying room rent at the Blackstone, conditions being what they were. He dressed and went over to the hotel and picked up his things and checked out. He had two martinis at the hotel bar and took a cab to Nora's. It was a little after eight-twenty when he returned. Nora was home, soaking in the bath.

After an affectionate, almost husbandly greeting, he sat down on the bathstool: 'You must be tired,' he said.

'I had about five hours,' she said. 'I really don't need much more than that.'

'Did I hear you on the phone?'

'Yes. It was a friend. We had plans for today. I'd forgotten and it was difficult to refuse.'

'A date?'

'No. A girl friend. Did you sleep well, Nick?'

'Fine,' he said. 'What would you like to do?'

'What would you?' she asked.

'I don't know,' he said. Their eyes met for a moment, then his shifted. 'You have a fine body.'

'I like you, Nick.' And she did, too, she thought. Was really very attracted to him, she realized now that she had seen him again. She liked the driving animal quality that he had, and the wild, outraged almost, and violated way he would make you feel sometimes; it permeated you not only from the often almost violent primitive way that he would look but from the almost violent and primitive way that you knew was real and inside. There just wasn't anything passive about him. And that was it. It was one thing, Nora knew, that a woman hated in a man more than anything: Passivity. Women, most all women, spoke of man's harshness, his injustice, his parsimony, and his tyranny as being his chief deficiencies. But they weren't. She knew better than that. She had whored long enough to know that. What a woman really detested in a man, no matter what they said, was his passivity. His overdependence. Or meekness. Or neglect. Or indifference.

Nick was vain. There was no question about that. Any man who thought as much about himself as he did, was as constantly inwardly concerned as he was, had to be self-centred and vain. Overly concerned with himself. His future. His past. As if the entire world revolved around him. But

goddamn it, he wasn't passive. He took time to be considerate. And really he was sweet and lovable underneath all that wired vanity and self-centredness. It was in his very touch, in his very way, if you recognized it. It would not, she deduced, be easily recognized unless you really knew him. Or had been to bed with him. Of course, going to bed was the best way of knowing anyone – Rather, how it was after you had been to bed.

'I like you, Nora,' he was saying. 'And more than that.'

'You don't know me.'

'Nor you me.'

'I think I do,' she said.

'What did you do today?'

She hesitated a moment: 'Had a fitting.'

He lit a cigarette.

'Tell me about yourself. What you did in the war. How old you are.'

The brown wetness of her shoulders and the wetness of her body suddenly reminded him of a translation of a Hindu poem he had read in Old Delhi: How water gave the nude female body an added, almost aesthetic dimension.

'I'm very young,' he said. 'At least a lot younger than I look.'

'I'll tell you. Twenty-eight. Not over thirty.'

'Thanks,' he said with a finality. He had decided he'd better not tell her. 'About my life? Not much to say. Born. Schooled. Armed. Almost killed. A very commonplace life these days.'

He stood up and handed her the towel, and took another towel and did her back.

'I've an idea,' she said. 'We could take the car and go to the country for dinner. How would you like that?'

'I'd like that.'

'And put the top down.'

'Wonderful,' he said. 'Gas?'

'Plenty.'

'Where will we go?'

'Out north. There are some lovely places out north. West of where you live.'

'The Villa?'

'Better than that. You've been away a long time, Nickie.'

'I used to hate being called Nickie. I like you to call me that,' he lied suddenly, in that way he had of suddenly lying. Without forethought, or malice, or intent to fool. He had been doing it ever since he was around ten, he remembered again now, still unable to even understand why.

She dressed and he changed and they went down and picked up the car, which was a late model cream coloured Cadillac convertible.

'You drive?' she asked him.

'Please,' he said.

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Chapter Eight

DRIVING down the drive in the June night, a silver ribbon of moonglow coming straight in from far out on the lake that was dark and white-capped from the good summer wind, her arm around his arm, and the lights of the car and the lights in the tall apartments along Lake Shore, all as he had once known it and never thought he would see it or feel it again, filled suddenly with a strange nostalgia that was strangely peaceful and serene, that for now it was not necessary to speak only necessary not to speak, to think contented and clearly for a while only those thoughts that floated up now so clean and clear and undirected, facing them for once as they came and were, unhindered, unhindered by his own choice of thought, or anxiety, of the militant way he had acquired of directing them –

thinking that

the lights of *this* world had never been turned off and they would never know the darkness of the city at war

up ahead was the Edgewater Beach Hotel somewhere and soon you would see it and it would be all flood-lit imposing and regal

remember how you had always make-believed when you were a little boy that it was a castle and that someday you would conquer it and hang your own flag from atop its tower and order your fleet to anchor off its shores

had they begun training him for it even then
even before the great battle of the Dunes, the battle of
Wizenburg's eye

was the present mistake the result of the past sin or was
it a sin if you did not know

but when the castle was his when the flag waved up there
and the fleet was anchored offshore there would be a new
domain that would be ruled just and fair and there would be
happiness in the land

somewhere up ahead near that shore was his house and the
lawns would be green now and the tall trees lush and
Simplex the mighty German Shepherd dog would be sitting
peacefully on the steps

would he remember him

he would be old now old and scarred and still Nick-would-
bet there would be that kindness in his eyes

that was a real dog

like his father Schnapps the one they had before him

and you and Pierro fighting in the dusk the day that
Schnapps was killed Pierro so much older than you and
bigger than you and tougher than you

the blood pouring from your nose and mouth and Pierro
ontop of you pounding and yelling say it say it there-is-no-
dog-heaven say it say it Nick there-is-no-dog-heaven Nick
say it

there is there is kill me you rotten sons-a-bitch kill me but
there is there is you sick syphilis sons-a-bitch there is

and Old Pete saying how I'll kill you kid what you said
you should be ashamed to talk to your family your blood
that way you crazy kid what have I done to deserve this
crazy kid that hurts his own name and Oh My God believes
in heavens for dogs

that goddamn Mary and her Catholic ways Oh my God a
heaven for dogs Old Pete raves

what kind of a son you got woman what kind of a son
have you raised Oh God what have I ever done to deserve this
disgrace upon disgrace

Come Pierro we take a ride and we forget that crazy kid
and his crazy ways

the Catholics are ruining the world I say beware of the
Catholics Pierro kid behind those Roman walls evil is hid

You listen to Old Pete Pierro kid and I'll teach you of
dollars remember you're a Greek kid

and there in the bush shaking with fear was your sister
Yvonne blackeyed so skinny and small

how good was her arm upon your arm how wet her tears
against your cheek for you how full was her fright so full
for one so skinny and small

and Mary's kind voice and gentle hand

Come Nick we'll fix your cuts and bathe your face

then we should have some cake

and then the tears began to really well •

and once inside you did not think that Yvonne was alone
in the garden still

thinking that

somewhere west was Old Pete's big lot that he would not
sell and would not build on and there were buildings all
around and how Pete would smile everytime he passed the
lot savouring what it would bring someday

on the lot was Old Gus and you have not thought of him
since that time you almost died in the snow

Gus would be seventy now and Nick remembered the
garden on the lot and the old shack and Gus's three goats
which the alderman made him deodorize

always when you went to visit him in the spring or summer
or fall he would be out in the garden for him things
would grow and he had told you it was due partly to the
thought you had when you planted that really made things
grow and you did not understand

he was tall and lean and his hair almost shaved was grey
and black and he had the homeliest most beautiful face you
had ever seen and the softest voice and could not be disturbed
and looked so much taller than he was slightly hunched over
with long gangling arms it was a holy face you had decided
once

for some reason he was one relative that Old Pete could
not get to work and he lived on the lot and in the cafes in
Greektown they said that he could spell the evil eye and
forecast the future and that Old Pete never made a deal with-
out consulting him

Old Pete's mother who was eighty-eight when she came to

this country and ninety-five when she died always laughing always smiling always spitting good-luck on Nick she had told of Gus and how when Gus was young in their town of Verdamah he would not work but tended the sheep in the hills and forests, he was huge then over two hundred forty pounds and his strength was legend and he had a beard and would spend all day reading books that they did not understand sometimes would not eat for days and finally went away to Mount Athos and did not come back for a year and how different serene different he was when he came back and gaunt thin and he never read any more he had a way with animals that was the talk of all the countryside and the people of the valley feared his strange powers and once had tried to hang him and when the time came nobody would

later he came to America and for a while worked in the grape vineyards in California and Old Pete had wanted him for a watchdog in his club but he would not work so he went and built a shack on Old Pete's lot which was a prairie lot almost then and made his garden and got his goats and the buildings sprung up around him just like Old Pete knew that they would but Gus stayed on and the building did not seem to bother him and he went to Lincoln Park and picked dandelion greens and cooked them in a way that nobody else could and Old Pete would talk for days before the dandelion feast that Gus was soon to have and sometimes Old Pete would take Nick and they would eat the dandelions in the shack and drink the juice and Gus would sing laments from the Grecian hills and play his zither and Old Pete would cry

there was much publicity when the people in the buildings complained of the goats and the alderman took out an injunction against Gus And Old Pete had the time of his life reading about it in the papers and for some reason used his influence down at City Hall so that Gus was allowed to keep his goats

it was the talk of the town and Pierro had thought it was disgraceful and his mother had a hard time getting him to high school for several days because of his shame

I must see Gus soon Nick thought and maybe he will understand some of the things I feel but cannot say or express

Gus had known how I felt about the war he was the only

one it seemed and remember how when I said goodbye he had never even taken my hand only smiled that sweet sad smile and said I will see you soon and will be older and wiser but remember you will not be as clean or as young anymore and do not expect to be

that was all

Goodbye you said and he had only smiled and as you drove away you saw him watching you and he was petting one of the goats

thinking that

there back there behind him in the city was the opera house and Mary his mother taking him for the first time in the rain on a Saturday afternoon

how the kids had given it to you that week when they heard you were going to the opera

remember you had to leave the gang after the morning football game and were not able to go to the drugstore with them

and how embarrassed you were when the time came and ran so quickly towards the car that you fell and skinned your knee and ripped your new knickers

but Mary said you were going anyhow you would learn to appreciate the good things that her grandfather who had fought in the Civil War and died at Chickamauga appreciated you were and-don't-forget-it sixth generation American on her side

how different was the opera than you had thought how beautiful and how sad it had made you want to cry but too ashamed to cry as small as you were you seemed to understand and later remember taking Ellen on her fifteenth birthday and how later you listened to the records and read the libretto of Tosca aloud to each other and that it was not until later during the war that you finally knew what the words to that aria you loved so meant

where were you when you learned what the words meant Greece or Italy

but that made no difference now

there was snow he remembered hills and snow and he had remembered the hero about to be shot singing to Tosca 'My dream of love is destroyed forever'

'And I must die despairing
And I must die despairing
How cruel is death
O life was never sweeter
Never sweeter'

In the hills and the snow you learned how sweet it was
'What are you thinking about?' Nora asked.

He could see the floodlights on the Edgewater Beach now.
'An opera,' he said.

'You're kidding.'

'Yes,' he said. He was driving very slowly, feeling still strangely peaceful, feeling the summer wind to his face, hoping she would not speak again for a while.

She did not. And they drove far out past all the familiar places and ate steak in a fine little restaurant that was more like a home than a restaurant far out in the woods near Lake Forest. They decided that when they were done they would go to a place out west of Wilmette where he and his friends had gathered in those, the frantic days before the war to have a drink there and maybe say hello to Louie the bartender who was his friend. She thought that would be fine, and they were in no hurry. They took their time, as if they were on a planned holiday, knowing but not saying that shortly they would catch up with the world again. You were so much a part of this world really that you almost felt guilty leaving it for a while. So they drank well, and did not feel that guilt for this while.

In Peru, Indiana at the same moment the world *was* moving on. Old Pete Stratton and George and Charlie Stratos were sitting in the back booth of an old high ceilinged restaurant that had a long counter and mahogany stained seats on the counter chairs and mahogany stained booths and coat racks and an old tiled floor. It was a clean place with very bright lights and you could tell by the neatness of the waitresses and the neat clean way the display cases were that it was well run.

The place belonged to Alex Nestos who was a distant relative of the Stratos brothers. Alex came from a town not far from Old Pete's home town of Verdamah. He had had this restaurant in Peru for over twenty years and owned

several buildings in the town, and his nephew managed the theatres for Interstate in Peru. Alex was fifty years old and partially bald and heavy set with massive hairy forearms. His wife worked the kitchen and his daughter the cash register. It was a tightly run business.

The Stratos brothers and Old Pete had been in the back booth for over an hour drinking Turkish coffee, waiting for Alex to return. It was almost ten o'clock and some of the movie crowd had drifted into the restaurant from the early show. Alex was a half hour late probably, they deduced, because of the sudden unexpected cloudburst about an hour before. Finally he came in and hollered out to the kitchen. His squat aproned peasant wife silently brought him some coffee and silently went back to her work.

'Well?' Charlie Stratos the elder asked, still looking worried and tired and unkempt with the same imitation flannel suit and his shirt collar bent up outside his coat lapels. 'Did you see him?'

He was speaking of the union man Raker.

'I saw him,' Alex said. 'He wants another G under the table to call off the strike.' Alex Nestos always called a thousand a G, a hundred a C. He had never lived in Chicago and assumed that was the way the smart boys there spoke of various denominations.

'The sonofabitch,' Old Pete rendered another benediction.

'You think he means it,' Charlie Stratos said dryly, unsmilingly, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief.

'I don't think he means it,' George Stratos the younger said.

'I didn't ask you, George,' Charlie said, irritated. 'Do you think he means it, Alex?'

Alex thought about it for a moment: 'He means it. He'll strike the projector operators if you don't come across. What has he got to lose? The dirty bastard,' Alex said meaningfully. 'He'll strike them and if you get someone in there to take their place he'll put stinks bombs in your theatres. And picket you. And get the city fathers up against you because you're big city people.'

'I knew we should have watched out for that guy,' Old Pete said.

'You know, Pete,' Charlie the Elder said, 'if we give in to this fellow he'll want a raise in every one of our territories. You know that can run into a hell of a lot of money, Pete.'

Pete's right fist was clenched now and he was tapping the table. 'What do you have in mind, Charlie?'

'What do you think we ought to do?' George asked Alex.

'I think we ought to hit him in the head, that's what I think. That's the only way to take care of a guy like that.'

Old Pete coughed and looked off towards the kitchen as if he hadn't heard and took out a ten cent cigar and began to unpeel the wrapper. He had on a dark cheap suit, his travelling suit. The one he always wore to the small towns so that the local folks wouldn't get suspicious of him, would not think he was taking any real money out of their towns. He always got a kind of sly satisfaction from putting on the suit. Like a little boy who had pulled a quickie of some sort.

'I got some friends out at the circus that could use a couple of C notes.'

George Stratos the younger finally spoke. 'I don't like this kind of business.'

'I gotta go to the toilet,' Old Pete said, and got up and left.

'There's a fellow coming in here in a little while. Comes in every night. I give him some work clean up around my buildings,' Alex said. 'A big-guy. A roustabout. Use to be a strongman. He don't like Raker either. I think we can do some business.'

'He'll be careful won't he, Alex?' Charlie asked. 'You know we got a big business to protect. God knows I don't like this kind of thing. But what you gonna do with a fellow like that. You don't do it first, he does it to you,' Charlie said. He had his glasses off now and was wiping his eyes with his fingers. The eyes were tired and glazed and he strained for a vision of Alex as he spoke.

'You want to get some air?' Charlie the Elder said to George. 'Maybe you an' Old Pete want to get some air.'

'That's him coming in the door now,' Alex said.

'Jesus Christ,' George Stratos the younger said. The man was at least six foot eight and must have weighed two seventy-five. He had a cauliflower ear and a smashed-in nose and his head was shaven and his arms hung down past his knees and he limped slightly with a game right leg.

'Nice boy,' Alex said, grinning, 'Uh?'

'I'll wait for Old Pete,' George the younger said. And walked towards the men's room.

'You sure he knows what he's doing,' Charlie Stratos said to Alex.

'He's all right. I tell you, Charlie, he's all right.'

'All right, Alex. We'll take care of you, too.'

'Forget it, Charlie,' Alex said. 'Maybe you get a little side deal sometime, you need cash. I'll come in for a couple of G's.'

'I'll keep you in mind, Alex. Next time we make a move. I'll keep you in mind.'

'You got a big business there, Charlie.'

'We work hard. I'm tired, Alex. You know Georgie's young and hasn't had much experience. And Old Pete he's getting up in years. He's good with the money but he can't go like he use to. I gotta do more all the time. And this hay-fever kills me.'

'Well, his kid should be coming along soon. That kid might be some help,' Alex said.

'Yeah. If Old Pete would leave him alone. Nice kid.'

'I like Nick. My daughter likes Nick too,' Alex said.

'So does mine,' Charlie said. 'Me and Pete we talked about it a couple of times. Maybe we fix the kids up. Then we really got something for the business.'

'I hear the kid's hard to handle.'

'All kids are nowadays, Alex.'

'Old Pete's nephew, he some smart kid, I hear. Hard to handle, too. Too much education, I hear.'

Charlie Stratos put his glasses back on and wiped his slightly pockmarked face with his crumpled handkerchief.

'I don't know the nephew very well. He got hurt in the war. He's back now.'

'Should I bring my friend over?' Alex asked. 'You want to meet him?'

'I'll let you handle it, Alex. We're blood. I can trust my own blood to handle it. Can't I?'

'You know me, Charlie.'

'You think you might ask Raker once more?' George asked.

'I asked him already.'

'Ask him once more, eh?'

'If you say so, Charlie.'

'You want to take a walk?' Charlie asked. 'We pick up Old Pete and George, maybe walk by the theatres.'

'I better talk a little business with my friend.'

'We leave early tomorrow,' Charlie said. 'Now we know you take care things here. We leave early.'

'I'll see my friend for a minute and then I take a little walk and say good-bye to the boys. Let me tell my friend to wait.'

'All right, Alex. A cheque, huh.'

'No cheque,' Alex said. 'On me, on Alex tonight.'

'Thanks,' Charlie said dryly and unsmilingly, wiping his face once more with the crumpled handkerchief. 'I won't forget this, Alex. You're my blood.'

'Thanks,' Alex said. And left and went over to the counter where the giant sat.

Later the Stratos and Old Pete had a meeting up in Old Pete's hotel room.

'You think Alex can handle this fellow?' Old Pete asked.

'Alex is very smart,' Charlie said. 'He got a lot of property working with the sheriff on the auction sales. Alex will handle it all right.'

'I been thinking how we can get rid of that kid in Youngstown,' Old Pete said.

'We gotta be careful with that kid,' Charlie said.

'He's a crazy kid,' George the younger said.

They had purchased five theatres from the boy's father and part of the deal was that they retain his son, Jerry Percy, as regional manager for the Youngstown area. The father had more theatres that Interstate was interested in purchasing. But the son drank a lot and did not tend to business and they were trying to get rid of him without offending the father.

'I figured it all out,' Old Pete said. 'All we have to do is move the regional offices. The kid was born and raised in Youngstown. He's a big shot there and he won't want to move. We assume, naturally, that he will move. Then he'll tell us he doesn't want to. And we'll try and get him to move. Even ask his father to help get the kid to move. We move the regional office to maybe Muncie. The kid won't move, I tell you. I figured it out.'

'I think you're right,' Charlie Stratos said dryly. 'That's a hell of an idea, Pete. That kid *won't* move.'

'Wonderful, Mr Stratton,' George the younger said. Charlie was always fascinated by Pete. Like a proud son, he was always awed when Pete came up with something clever or cunning.

'The old man may even get sore at the kid, if he won't move,' George the younger added.

'I don't think so, George,' Old Pete said. 'They're Jews. Jews, they stick together. That old man is sorry for that kid. Cause the kid killed one of his own kids backing the car out of the driveway. Young Percy was sober too. I kinda feel sorry for the kid myself. But we can't let him ruin the business. What the hell the kid's got all he'll ever need. The old man can't live much longer. And he's the only son. He's got plenty.'

'I'm tired,' Charlie said. 'We start around six? all right?'

'We stop someplace for the coffee. We get out of here early, all right,' Old Pete said.

'I'll wake you, Mr Stratton,' young George said.

'I'll be up,' Old Pete said.

George would ask Old Pete on almost every trip if he could wake him, but Old Pete was always the first one up.

George and Charlie said goodnight and left. Old Pete undressed, and took an ice cold bath. Faced the East. Crossed himself Orthodox fashion. Prayed. Crossed himself again. And climbed into bed. It had been a long drive and a long day for an old man. He was asleep in a few moments.

Chapter Nine

THE name of the place where Nick and his friends used to meet in those urgent days before the war was called Los Caballeros. It was not a Spanish type place however. It was west of the North Shore on Highway 41; the expressroad between Chicago and Milwaukee. It was run by an ex radio announcer and catered mostly to the upper strata of subur-

banites and to certain society people and to certain others who were not too upper or too society but were attracted by the pleasant, informal atmosphere.

When Nick and Nora had arrived at the place a little before midnight the bar was wartime standing room two deep, couples and groups standing against the walls informally, and crowds around the two twenty-six dice tables. It was a softly lit place, rustic and comfortable and made to look richer than it was by the rich appearance of its clientele. Nick had managed to say hello to his bartender friend Louie. And Louie had bought them a quick drink, and told them that some of Nick's friends had a table in the back in the dining room.

It had turned into quite a party. Ellen the Fair was there. And Raul Lewis whom Nick had roomed with two summers when they were counselors at a summer camp up in Wisconsin was there with Ellen. And Nick's best friend just about, Tuttle Smythe, was there. Tuttle and Nick had played football and hockey together and in the summers a lot of golf and tennis, and once had hitch-hiked to Florida together. Had roomed together Nick's short time in college (five months). Quit college together. Gone into the army together, and were then separated. Raul and Tuttle were both in uniform. They had both gotten back within the last month, they said, and only earlier that evening had been talking about Nick. Tuttle was with a tall brunette girl; wistfully thin, wide-eyed, and gracious. Nick remembered having met her before the war and was not surprised that although Tuttle had been back from Italy only two weeks, he was already engaged to her. Tuttle had been in love with one woman or another ever since Nick could remember. It had usually only taken him five or ten minutes after meeting up with someone attractive to make himself believe that this was it, the real thing. Tuttle was a thickly, solidly built chap with rosy red little boy cheeks and straight neatly combed blond hair. He looked about the same. As if for him there had been no war. And Ellen looked about the same; still something the way a nun looked; small and soft-pretty faced, with a firm little nun's body and large brown eyes.

They had all become very excited seeing each other again. There were other people at the long table. Tuttle's younger

brother was there. He had only recently been drafted and was in the navy up at Great Lakes. And some friends of Raul and Ellen were there, and one other fellow who had lived around the North Shore when Nick was younger. Nick couldn't remember his name, and had stumbled through his introduction to Nora.

All together they were about twelve. There was an organist playing the popular songs: 'Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition', 'Comin' in on a Wing and a Prayer', (God, Nick had thought once between numbers, how even popular music had taken to religion with this war) 'I'll Be Seeing You', and 'When You're Away Dear'.

They seemed so very young to be Nick's friends, Nora had thought when they first sat down. She felt so much more mature than they, and she was glad when Raul's mother and father joined their table. Raul's father looked like an exact replica of Robert Benchley, and was half drunk, and was very humorous in a quiet half-asleep Benchley way.

'You're really thinking of staying in, then?' Tuttle was asking Nick.

'I might.'

'You always were a funny duck,' Raul said. Raul had four rows of ribbons on. He had soft wavy red hair, and a red-freckled jester's face, and didn't look over seventeen. He was twenty-four, one year older than Nick.

'Well you finally got to be a pilot, boy', Nick said to Raul. 'How do you like it?'

'You'll never get me up there again,' Raul said.

'He got shot down,' Tuttle said. 'Over Italy. He was a prisoner.'

'Where were you after France, Nick?' Ellen the Fair, the Square, the angel-faced rich bitch said. 'You stopped writing after France.'

'I thought you stopped,' Nick said.

'I never did. I wrote you a lot after your last letter.'

'Maybe while I was in the hospital. I was in the hospital quite a while.'

'What did you do exactly?' Ellen asked him.

'Fought, exactly,' Nick smiled.

'What are you going to do now,' Raul said. 'That's what's bothering me.'

'Why don't we go into something,' Tuttle said.

'What?' Nick asked. 'What do we know how to do?'

'Contracting ought to be good,' Tuttle said.

'I'm no business man,' Nick said.

'You can learn,' Tuttle said.

'I'd like to go into advertising,' Raul said. 'But how do you go about getting into advertising?'

'Why don't you try working,' Raul's father said.

'I don't want to work yet,' Nick said. 'Why should I go to work. Get so goddamned wrapped up in a job that I probably really don't like. Am not suited for. So wrapped up I can't ever get out. So goddamned inert wrapped up I wouldn't even know that I'd be better off out.'

'You're still the hothead, aren't you, Nick?' Raul's father said. He was in public relations. But secretly, ever since he could remember, he had wanted to be a doctor.

'Hothead, hell,' Nick said. 'You *had* to work to survive. We don't. Why shouldn't we take advantages of it? Take the time to find something that's concrete. Within our own framework. Our personality. So that what contribution we do make to this living is worthwhile.'

'Listen to him,' Tuttle said.

'Where you been,' Raul said. 'Up in the Himalayas studying with those monks.'

'He's got a point,' Raul's father said.

'I know I have,' Nick said.

A waitress was bringing more drinks and the organist was playing 'It's Been a Long, Long Time . . .'

'What's Nick started now?' Nora asked Raul's father.

'I think Nick's right,' Ellen said, eyeing Nora.

Raul's father was resting his chin on his hand, his elbow on the table. 'They're all feeling sorry for themselves,' he said to Nora. 'They think they're the only generation that fought a war.'

'I know all about the First War,' Raul said in a bored manner to his father. 'For Christ's sake, Dad, they don't want to hear about that war.'

God, Nora thought, if I ever talked to my father like that he would have bounced me clean across the store. That was one thing that really always peeved her: this modern,

this American father-son business that was so much the vogue, was really nothing much more than another vogue. Or was vogue the word? No, not vogue. An excuse really. A chance, perhaps, for a man to relive his youth via his son and his son's friends. It was so obvious, she thought, how the son was used. Inevitably it led to or was caused by a resentment towards the mother. Made the man somehow feel cheated about his own lack of freedom. Nora should certainly know that was a truth. She was paid by the hour to listen to that story. And always basically it was the same story. With the same inevitable result: a self-pitying man trying to make up for his weakness by one studbull roaring run on a commodity, which for a change, he *really* thought he owned because he had paid for it. Which, she thought pleasurably, inevitably only added to his guilt about his own gutlessness.

Nick with that sardonic half-smile was looking at Raul's father. 'We fought your goddamn war that you didn't finish anyhow,' he said a little nastily. 'Your war. That was our war too.'

'Take it easy, Nick,' Raul said.

Nora put her hand on Nick's. 'Dance, Nick?'

'I don't dance,' Nick said. 'It's a fact, isn't it?' Nick asked Raul's father.

'That doesn't solve anything,' Tuttle said. Tuttle was always a little slow. Except with women. School had really been a major problem with him and any sort of serious talk made him uncomfortable. Nick wondered for a moment how Tut had ever gotten through O.C.S. 'What are we going to do?' Tut asked as his wife-to-be looked at him admiringly and approvingly. 'That's the problem.'

'What do we know how to do?' Nick asked again.

'Fight,' Raul said. 'We could organize a gang. And maybe take the rackets over from the Dagos. We all know how to fight.'

Nick snorted. 'Now ain't that somethin',' he winked at Nora then turned to Raul's father. 'You must be very proud of yourselves. Of your generation. Your culture. Your society. What the hell kind of a society is that? That gives birth to a generation that doesn't know how to do one goddamn thing except fight.'

'I wish you'd watch your language, Nick,' Ellen said.

Nora smiled.

'Take it easy,' Raul said.

'Let's have another drink,' Nick said.

'Let's,' Tuttle said. 'Well, that's one thing we're pretty good at besides fighting. Drinking.'

'That's what we could be,' Raul said. 'Drunkards.'

'That costs money,' Nick said.

'You got any money?' Raul asked Nick. Raul was obviously a little tight now, Nora saw, and the redfreckled no-longer jester's face was suddenly startlingly old and mournful.

Nick shook his head.

'How about you, Tut?' Raul asked. 'Any money?'

'No,' Tut said.

'Dad, you wouldn't want to invest some money in a *real* drunk, would you? A real, long term drunk?' he asked his father.

Raul's father, who had been half drunk for the past seventeen years, never really drunk, or wild drunk, just pleasantly half drunk, looked around at them, thinking for a moment how very young they were, to be so old. How very dispossessed and deprived they felt now when they were just beginning. And yet, underneath it all, you felt a kind of rebellion. As if they were sick of the world we had made for them. Sick because they lived in it. Because to them it was a pretty sick world. And yet they did not seem to know what the sickness was.

Each war, it seemed, took some of the youth, the innocence, the old-fashioned peacefulness out of America. It wasn't that wickedness was now more prevalent in the individual, Raul's father knew; the amount of that had not varied since the beginning of man. It was in the national ideal. The group approach. In a sense capitalism, as America had known it, had run its course. Money had long enough been the god. And to them it was a false god and a false faith in that it offered them no individual salvation. In THE SYSTEM of our TIME, our ERA, a man was unable to see himself individually as worthy of any serious attention. And yet ingrained in him was the materialistic concept. And add to that a national heterogeneity unique in the history of the world. It was a horrifying and complex contradiction.

But you would have to bet that they would somehow rebel. You would have to bet they would. They had all the ingredients. At least almost all. The dissatisfaction, the restlessness, the eagerness for change and identification. Nick was living proof of that; the forerunner in a sense. Why, in my day anyone would have given almost anything for the opportunity that Nick has, Raul's father thought. God, but Nick looked old.

Someone set another drink down in front of him. He had two backed up now, and saw that except for Raul and Tuttle and Nick, everyone had several drinks backed up.

So they drank big. Like giants. That was the way they were raised. The way they fought. The way they did everything. And if they were going to degenerate, that's the way they'd do that, too. Big. Like giants. Like one big Roman debauchery.

'I don't see why some of you don't go back to college,' Ellen the Fair was saying. 'Not a one of you has a degree.'

'I got a degree,' Raul said. 'In prison camp. The third degree. But you never heard of that one, did you?' he giggled at Ellen.

'I'd like to go to college,' Tuttle said.

'So you could play football,' Nick said.

'Sure,' Tuttle said. 'But I can't go to college and get married too.'

'Lots of boys are doing that now,' Ellen said.

'What he means,' Nick said, 'is that he can't go to college with a wife and live in the manner in which he's been accustomed. Either that,' Nick said sardonically, 'or he's afraid to ask his woman to make the struggle.'

'You're full of shit,' Tuttle said menacingly.

'He's kidding,' Raul said.

'Don't be so serious,' Raul's father said to Tuttle.

Ellen was holding her hand up to her mouth as if she had never heard the word before. Looking at her, Nick was forced to grin as he remembered the things she loved to hear him say when they had been in the woods out in the forest preserve together.

'I think Ellen has a point,' Raul's father said. 'College might be good for you. It would give you that time you need so desperately.'

'Time, hell,' Nick said, drinking. He was drinking ferociously now and it didn't seem to have any effect. 'Regimentation. Planned development. The way our colleges are, about all you get is narrowed. Taken out of your own narrow environment and put into the narrow environment of your college. Alma Mater. Sure, it can be helpful. Professionally. Or connection wise. But there's something narrowing about it too. I've got a cousin in New York. A lawyer. I had lunch with him last week. Where? at the Harvard Club. We went out night-clubbing. With whom? several of his chums from where? Harvard. Sitting up in his office, he was referring a client to a lawyer in Florida. A lawyer from Harvard, of course. Very broadening. I wonder if Harvard's got a cemetery of its own. So they can all be buried together. They certainly must have their own private exclusive heaven.'

'Stop it, Nick,' Ellen said. 'You know you don't mean a word you say.'

'I'm with you,' Raul said raising his glass.

Nick drank with Raul and then turned to Nora and spoke softly: 'I hope you don't mind,' he said. 'I haven't seen these fellows in a long time.'

'I'm enjoying it,' Nora said. 'I feel good.'

'We'll go soon, all right?'

'Whenever you say. I'm feeling pretty good,' she said. 'You've never seen me feeling pretty good, have you, Nickie. Little Nickie.' She put her hand up on his neck and reached over and kissed him and whispered: 'Have you, little Nickie?'

There was a kind of wildness in her now; a kind of turbulence, a self-indulgent animation that somehow up to now she had managed to hold secretly, suppressed in reserve; and now that the gates had opened it had sprung uncontrollably loose. Momentarily it had frightened him, as if he had taken on something that he couldn't handle and did not understand.

Or maybe this was what a *real* woman was like. Or should be like. Maybe he had never been with a *real* woman before. Ellen would never have tried to enjoy herself under similar circumstances, would always manage to withhold one way or another at least a particle of her womanhood. As if the womanhood itself indeed were bait. And on a string, too, he

thought. Ellen could learn a lot from this woman, he thought, taking Nora's hand, and taking his drink in his other hand, and feeding some of the drink to her, then polishing it off himself.

They finished what they had on the table, and had Louie the bartender fix them two huge doubles, and took them out to the car. Everybody had walked out to the car with them. Nick had agreed to stand up for Tuttle at his wedding. And they were all going to meet at the same table the night after next, and Saturday were all going to the races out at Arlington. And Sunday Raul's father was going to give a party for all of Raul's friends that were back. And for their women. Nora had to come, Raul's father insisted. Didn't Nora agree it was about time someone gave a rip-snorting party for all the lads that had done so much for their country. Your god-damn right it was about time.

They drove off with everyone hollering goodbye, drank their drink on the way, Nick driving eighty down 41 to Foster Avenue, then cutting east toward the Lake, driving as fast as traffic would permit, his hand on her tanned smoothskinned thigh, feeling that strange wild turbulence and animation that she exuded, until he too felt it fully, wildly.

Quickly they were home. And wildly turbulently they made love three times then went to bed. And she woke him at noon after he had slept only four hours and gave him some vodka and tomato juice, and kissed him good morning with the same wild turbulence and animation that only a few hours ago he had gone to sleep on, and remembered suddenly some of the things that he had done for the first time that early morning. And they began drinking and making love again in that same wild and turbulent way, until finally he told her he would have to go. Everyone had seen him, his parents were sure to find out he was home, he would not want to hurt them.

When she told him that she would not be able to see him for several days, she had plans, it did not penetrate. He was too tired and hungover and somehow the walls of the apartment were closing in on him; if he didn't get out of there he would scream, he felt.

Now that he had been seen he had to get home quick

before someone told his family he was in town, he repeated to her worriedly. He did not go home that night, however. He told himself he was too tired, too hungover and took a cab to the Edgewater Beach Hotel where he bribed the clerk to get him a room.

Once in the room the loneliness began to return. He began to wonder what kind of possible plans Nora could have for the next few days. He thought of calling her, of telling her that there was no one at his home, or of just plain going back to her place and saying that he had changed his mind, feeling like a goddamn fool for having left in the first place.

He went down to the bar and had several drinks and then the tiredness hit him all at once. He knew he'd better get back upstairs and get some sleep. Tomorrow he would be tangling assholes with Old Pete. And he was in no shape to be taking Old Pete on. Well, maybe Mary could cover for him while he got straightened out.

Taking his shower he wondered what kind of a wife Nora would make. She certainly seemed to have everything that a wife should have. And he missed her. And wondered again what possible plans she could have.

Then he got into bed and just before he went to sleep he thought how very strange it was that he was really home.

Chapter Ten

NICK had arrived home at a little after three that next afternoon. Mary, Mary Stratton, Nick's mother, had of course been shocked at first, stunned by Nick's unexpected arrival. She had cried. And Nick was shocked, stunned by how Yvonne had grown. Yvonne was seventeen now, soon to be eighteen. It was hard to believe that anyone, especially Yvonne, could have grown so much in three short years. She was much taller, around five six, and had dark Grecian skin, and large dark eyes, and like Mary was long and loosely framed and had good straight legs. Yvonne was really very

pretty, surprisingly pretty for one who had been such an ugly child. And now she was even wearing lipstick, Nick had noticed. Not much lipstick, not enough to detract from the benign, sometimes almost melancholy look that she had always had; a kind of helpless expression that Nick had first seen when he was a very little boy watching her play one day in her play pen in the sun.

Mary looked fine, Nick thought. A little older. He noticed at once the roots of her hair needed a little bleaching. But beautiful still. A little more matronly, maybe, but beautiful and with that same aristocratic poise that she was truly unaware and unconscious of; so unconscious of she would have been truly staggered if she knew how many women were envious of it and how many men really admired it.

She had not known how to react, how to treat Nick at first. It had occurred to him that really this was the first time he had ever really seen her shocked, stunned by anything. She had started out by asking him to have something to eat. But he had just eaten, he said.

Then she had started out to deliver quite a long dissertation on how most people didn't really know what the boys in service had been through. She had been reading up on it, she said, how the boys should be treated when they came home. You could count on her, there would be no talk about the fighting in this household. Not one bit. She knew how upsetting it was to the boys to have people bring up things about the fighting. She had the book upstairs. Had studied it diligently, faithfully. It was by the wife of a very prominent psychologist; a brilliant woman with two sons of her own in the service. It was really a very well done book, Mary said, though she couldn't remember the name of the woman who wrote it. A condensed version of it had been published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, however.

So Nick wasn't to worry. There really wasn't anything such as 'shellshock' anyhow. Did Nick know that? Well, there wasn't. Really, there wasn't. There were cases of 'battle fatigue'. But 'shellshock' – you'd never hear that word used around this house. No, you wouldn't. Not as long as Mary Stratton was alive and there was a God in the Heavens, you wouldn't hear the word 'shellshock' used in this house, for a moment turning to Yvonne and telling her that if she ever

heard her use the word 'shellshock' in this house she would think Satan himself had ascended from the lower depths of his inferno and confronted her.

It had lasted fifteen minutes, at least, this dissertation on the psychology, the care and feeding, of the returned soldier. Mary had stood leaning back against one of the teak dining room chairs through all of this, in front of the long teak dining room table, all of which had been purchased at the McCormick auction, had stood there her hands behind her, her right toe pointed upward and moving in tiny arcs on the axis of the right high heel of the brown suede pumps she had only last week purchased for forty-four dollars at Saks Fifth Avenue, stood there looking as though she had stepped out of a full page advertisement in *Vogue* or *Mademoiselle*: the epitome of what the well-appointed woman in her early thirties should look like. She was forty-three. Neither she nor Nick realized she looked young enough to be Nick's sister or wife even. Or that he looked old enough. She just rambled on, quoting and undoubtedly terrible misquoting any parts of the book that seemed to catch her fancy.

Nick had been standing in the oval archway to the dining room, struck kind of half-dumb by the vehemence of her delivery; speaking as if he were not really there. As if she were not speaking to him alone but to an assembly of some kind. It made him feel very strange and awkward. He had stood staring at her dumbly and wide-eyed, shifting his weight from one foot to another and finally he had realized that she had no intention of stopping. Then it had struck him as being rather funny, really. Funny and sad at the same time. Poor Mary, he thought. Poor, sweet lovable Mary.

'How about a drink, Mother,' he said finally. 'I could really use a drink.'

'Of course, darling,' she said kind of absent mindedly, then resumed her discourse for a few more moments, then said, 'What would you like?'

'Scotch, if you have it,' Nick smiled warmly.

'I'll get it for you, dear,' she said. 'Help is so hard to get these days. The maid's off today. Thursday,' she said as if Nick didn't know what day it was. The fact was that he didn't. 'They get Sunday, besides Thursday now. Since the war. You look wonderful, Nick. Wonderful.'

'I feel fine, Mother,' he said. 'It's good to be home,' he lied as an afterthought.

'You sit down,' she said. 'Just sit down and relax. Put your feet up. Rest. You're going to have lots of rest. God knows you deserve it.'

'Have a drink with me, Mother?'

'You know I hardly ever take a drink. Especially in the day. But I will today,' she said looking at her son lovingly. 'With you.'

'You're still a beautiful woman, Mother. More beautiful with the years, it seems,' he spoke sincerely, smiling affectionately.

'Thank you, Nick. But you don't mean that. You couldn't. I'm in my forties, you know.'

'I know,' he said. Then looked around the living-room. 'Where's the dog?'

'We had to put him away,' Yvonne said.

'When?'

'Last year, Nick,' Yvonne said.

'It doesn't seem right not to have a dog,' he said.

'Dad doesn't want one any more,' Yvonne said. 'He said there wasn't really any need for a dog without children around. And, of course, he said a dog was an added expense. You remember how he hollered when we bought the first canned dog food. Remember, Nick,' she smiled. 'Remember how red he got when he saw the canned dog food for the first time. Remember how we got the giggles, and how much madder that made him.'

'I remember, baby,' he said smiling. Then in a new, serious voice, 'It doesn't seem right without a dog in our house, though.'

'Come, Yvonne,' Mary said. 'Help me get your brother a drink. You stretch out, Nick. On the big couch.'

'All right.'

Mary went into the kitchen, Yvonne following. As soon as they got into the kitchen, Mary leaned over on the kitchen table and put her hand up to her head. 'Oh My God - My God - My Lord Jesus,' she said.

'What's wrong, Mother?'

'That scar. Did you see that scar on Nick's face - I thought I was going to faint. You know what a strong constitution

I have. But for a moment, I swear I thought I'd faint – that poor child. Promise me you won't say anything to him about it, Yvonne,' she said. 'Promise me that.'

'But I like it, Mother.'

'You what?'

'I like it,' she spoke genuinely, with no sense of mockery.

'Why, I believe you mean that,' Nick's mother said, straightening up and looking at her daughter disbelievingly.

'I do. Or I never would have said it,' Yvonne said.

Mary just stood there, obviously slightly bewildered by her daughter, her own flesh and blood, Nick's own flesh and blood, for delivering such a ridiculous childish statement.

'Well, I don't care whether you like it or not,' Mary said slightly indignantly. 'Don't you dare mention it. You hear. He's probably very sensitive about it. I've been reading up on this sort of thing, and it's not something that you bring up.'

'All right, Mother. But I don't think Nick would mind.'

'You heard me, Yvonne. You're still a child in many ways.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'I'll get Dr Combs on the phone right after dinner. He'll know someone. They've made marvellous strides in plastic surgery lately. Really marvellous. We'll get the best, the finest there is. You'll never know he had a scar. And this is one expense your father isn't going to complain about. That poor boy fought this terrible war for us, now we can do something in return without complaining about the expense,' she said adamantly, getting out the ice.

'Maybe Nick doesn't want an operation,' Yvonne said. 'Maybe he's tired of them, Mother. You know how much he's been in the hospital.'

'Nonsense. I know Nick. Nick's not a stupid boy. Maybe a little high-strung, but certainly not stupid.'

Yvonne felt like saying that he wasn't a boy, either, but knew it would only upset her mother more. And she wasn't about to upset Mary now. She had waited too long for Nick to come home. For him to take her places like he said he would in his letters. And if she was going to get to go with Nick she knew she couldn't afford to get on the wrong side of her mother.

Old Pete had never allowed her to have dates unless it

was with some Greek boy she had met at church and there weren't any Greek boys at church that interested her. Well, there was one. But he wasn't interested in her. Yvonne had not argued with her father for over a year about having dates; primarily because every time she had argued with him, Mary had taken her side and then Mary and Old Pete had usually ended up in a violent argument over it which lasted sometimes for days, and when they finally did end the argument, it was usually because of a stalemate. Then if they happened to remember how it had started, which was very seldom, they would blame her. And if they didn't blame her she ended up feeling guilty about it anyhow. More guilty, really, than when they hadn't blamed her. So she had just quit bringing it up. Which, she had later realized ironically, didn't seem to have any marked effect on the amount of time they spent arguing.

'I won't mention the scar. Or anything about the war, Mother. I promise.'

'That's a good girl,' Mary said to her daughter, as if her daughter were suddenly seven instead of seventeen. 'Now take this in to Nick.' She handed Yvonne a sterling silver tray with a scotch and soda in the middle of it, and a little lace napkin on the side. 'I'm going to call the grocery. We haven't a thing in the house that Nick really likes.'

'Aren't you going to have a drink with Nick?' Yvonne asked. 'He wanted you to.'

'As soon as I call,' Mary Stratton said. 'You take that in while I call. Then I'll make a nice little tray of sandwiches. You tell Nick I'll be right there.'

Mary watched Yvonne as she walked out of the kitchen, then turned and stared at the scotch bottle on the kitchen table. She stared at it for a long while, then her eyes lifted up and she listened for voices from the living room . . . then quickly she went over to the kitchen cabinet and took out a juice glass. She poured at least three ounces of the scotch into the glass, listened intently for a moment again, put the glass to her lips, swallowed twice heavily, and the drink was gone.

She sighed once deeply, put the back of one hand to her lips, then quickly went over to the sink and washed the glass, then made herself a regular scotch highball in a regular drink-

ing glass, set the glass on the kitchen table and walked into the butler's pantry where the kitchen phone was. She stared at the phone. It was the first drink she had had in three weeks, and this time she hadn't really needed it, had really never thought of having one until Nick had suggested it. She couldn't very well have refused Nick. Not his first day back, she told herself. He would certainly get suspicious if she didn't have one drink with him first day home from the war. Well, she wouldn't have any after today, she promised herself. Your son doesn't come home from the war every day.

Nick was having his drink on the big couch and Yvonne was sitting next to him. It was a large comfortable living-room decorated in a pseudo-Tudor style, with fine vases and a large Oriental rug. There was a big stone fireplace and it was cool now in the living-room, shady from the tall trees outside.

'You'll tell me all about the war then, Nick.'

'When we have the time, baby.'

'You fell in love, didn't you?'

'No. I had some friends that did. I guess I didn't have the time.'

'Is Daddy ever going to be mad because he didn't know you were coming,' she giggled mischievously. 'You did it on purpose, didn't you Nick? Not letting him know.'

'No, I really don't think I did - But I don't think he's going to like it very much when I tell him I'm thinking of staying in the Army for a while.'

'You are, really?'

'I think so.'

'Nick, don't say anything for a while. Not to Mother either. I think that would upset Mother more than Dad.'

'I won't say anything unless I have to. If I have to, though, I'm going to say it.'

'I know what you mean.'

'God you've grown. You must have lots of boy friends now.'

'You know Dad.'

'Still no dates?'

'No dates, Nick. I don't know why he mistrusts me so.'

'That narrow minded old bastard.'

'He doesn't mean anything wrong, Nick.'

'That's no goddamn excuse. He can't take his ignorance out on the whole human race.'

'Don't get excited. I didn't mean to excite you.'

'I'm not excited,' he grinned at her suddenly, taking her hand. 'Don't treat me like I'm some freak, though. The war's over. A lot of us have been in it. We're a little older, maybe a little wiser about the world. But there isn't anything wrong with us. At least not the way Mother thinks there is.'

'Mother's on horoscopes now.'

'No more tea leaves?'

'Horoscopes, exclusively. It's a riot, Nick. She's even got Dad convinced. You know how Dad won't ever sign papers on Tuesday because his mother said that Tuesday was for him an inauspicious day. Well, now there are a lot more days when he won't sign anything. You can hear him hollering for Mother early in the morning. "Mary, Mary, come with that book. Tell me what that book says about today",' Yvonne said laughingly as she told Nick. He was grinning. 'You know, Nick, how Mother is when he's low. Well, if he ever has something big on and he's low Mother always looks up some real favourable day, whether it's his day or whether it's his month doesn't matter, she just reads him something like "Today is a day of great opportunity. Assert your dynamic, masculine traits. Libra crosses with Jupiter!" Yvonne was giggling again mischievously. "Leo the Lion roars." It's hysterical. But it does the trick. By the time she's done with him he's like a young bull. Can't wait to get down to the office. Then, of course, she calls Martha. She and Martha still talk two or three hours every day on the phone. She calls Martha and tells Martha and they laugh and carry on like a couple of young girls. Wait till you hear them, Nick.'

'How's Pierro?' Nick asked. 'Have you seen him?'

'He stops by all the time to see Mary. I don't think that he and Dad have been hitting it off very well. He was hurt bad, Nick. He lost a lung.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Really, he almost died.'

'Still the sophisticate, though?'

'Hasn't changed a bit. It sure peeves Dad, though. I think Dad thinks he's queer. I really think Dad thinks that.'

'What do you know about queers.'

'I'm not a baby anymore, Nick.'

'You're my baby, aren't you.'

'Forever,' she said with exaggerated sense of the dramatic.

'We'll have some fun, Yvonne. We'll go places and have some fun.'

'I know some nice boys out at the base. At Glenview. When Dad's on a trip, a long one, Mother lets me have some of the boys over. I've got a cute young cadet. And Nick,' she said excitedly, 'you should have been here. One night this cadet, Charlie Young is his name, stopped by and Dad was home. He walked up to the door and asked for me. Dad said he must be mistaken, that no one by that name lived here. And Charlie said they certainly did. He'd been to a party here only a week before. Then Dad milked the entire story of the party out of him. Of course Dad didn't say anything to us at first. You know how he is. But you could tell when he came to the table that night that he was feeling pretty crafty about something. Of course he didn't just come out and tell us what he had found out. He roped us in but good. And when Mother and I had really begun to lie, then of course he lowered the boom. It was quite a night,' she giggled. 'The next time he went out of town he said he'd be gone for four days, but he showed up early the second night. Of course Mother suspected that he would, and I didn't invite anyone. Then the next time he went out of town he sent that real estate broker by. You know. Ralph Milos. That Hungarian. Milos said he was in the neighbourhood and thought he'd stop in and see Dad. He's a very poor liar, Milos is. You could tell Dad had sent him. And that really peeved Mother. Mother was really waiting for Dad when he got home from that trip. You know how she detests Milos.'

'Well, things haven't changed,' Nick said. 'I didn't think they would be changed, though. How do you always manage to laugh it off so, baby?'

'There's no sense in crying about it, Nick. If you cried about what went on around here you'd be crying all the time.'

He studied her for a moment.

'Let's go outside. I'd like to see the yard.'

'Mother wants to have a drink with you. Then we'll go. All right?'

'Fine,' Nick said.

Nick had a drink with his mother and several small crustless little chicken sandwiches. He did not want the sandwiches, but she had insisted and so he ate them. She asked him several times what he would like for dinner. He said he really didn't care. But she was persistent. Finally he settled for Chicken Pilaf, Greek style. Mary Stratton, though she didn't have an ounce of Greek blood in her, was known as the very best, the finest of Greek style cooks in the city. Of this reputation she was as unaware and unconscious as she was of her natural aristocratic poise. Consequently, lately, since she had taken to drinking heavily, she would occasionally try to outdo herself and the results were often gastronomically catastrophic.

After the drink Nick and Yvonne walked in the yard. It was a large yard, over an acre, with fine gardens and much lush foliage. In fact, you could barely see the street from the ivy-covered house when the trees were in full leaf. It was a big, old, well constructed red brick house of fourteen rooms, with a pagoda-like roof of red Spanish tile. Nick had always loved this home, and his mind wandered pleasantly with the boyhood memories that the summer and the yard recalled. Then they went inside and Nick went upstairs to clean up.

While Nick was cleaning up, Old Pete returned from his trip. Mary had posted Yvonne on look-out and Yvonne had called to her that Daddy was coming up the walk. Mary met him on the screened-in front porch and they embraced. 'How are you, Dolly,' Old Pete said, one arm around her, patting her shoulder with the other. With her high heels she was slightly taller than he.

'Take your fathers bag,' Mary said to Yvonne.

'You look tired, Pete,' Mary said. Most of the time she called him Pete except when they were having a disagreement. Then she called him Peter.

'I've a surprise,' she said. 'Remember what your horoscope said about this being a good week for you. That you were going to see someone that was close to you. And you hadn't seen in a long time.'

He stepped back looking at her with a slightly puzzled expression. There was no one that he could think of that he wanted to see.

'Nick's home,' she said. 'Here. Upstairs.'

There were seconds of silence.

'My son,' he said. 'My son.' He stood there for a moment, stood there waiting for the vast reality of it to sink in. When it did he burst into tears. 'Nick? - Here?' He began to cross himself Orthodox fashion.

'He got in this afternoon,' Mary said. 'He didn't tell anyone because he wanted to surprise *you*. He really loves you, Pete.'

'My son,' Old Pete said and crossed himself again.

'I'd better warn you, Pete. He looks terrible. Thin. And has the most horrible scar on his face. And old. Please don't say anything to him about how he looks. I don't think you'd recognize him if you saw him on the street.'

'Thank God he's home, that's all. Thank God,' he said eyeing his daughter. 'Yvonne, get down on your hands and knees and thank God Nick's home safe.'

'I already thanked God,' Yvonne said.

'You get down on your knees this minute,' Old Pete said.

'Come, Yvonne,' Mary said. 'We'll thank God together.' Mary led the way over to the porch swing and knelt down and crossed herself Catholic fashion, Yvonne next to her. Then Old Pete knelt down in the centre of the porch and crossed himself. For several moments it looked like it was going to become a contest to see who stayed down the longest, but then Mary gave in and got up. Old Pete waited a moment until Yvonne got up, then he did. And they went inside.

Mary called Nick. Nick came down the stairs. Old Pete was waiting at the foot of the stairs crying hard. They embraced, kissed each other on the cheek, then Old Pete took Nick's head in his hands and kissed him on the lips. They had always kissed when greeting, even in public, but it had been years since Nick could remember Old Pete having kissed him on the lips.

'Why didn't you tell me you were coming?' Old Pete asked, stepping back and removing his glasses and wiping the still flowing tears from his eyes.

'He wanted to surprise you, Pete. I told you that,' Mary interjected.

Then Old Pete spit on Nick, a good luck spit. And Nick spit back a good luck spit on Old Pete.

'Get out the wine,' Old Pete said. 'Get out the wine. My son's home. The wine, Mary. We all have a drink for our happiness.'

Sitting in the living-room, they had several drinks of wine. Old Pete had attempted to bring up the war several times, but Mary had subtly, cleverly intervened and managed to change the subject. She wasn't about to have her vast knowledge of The Care and Handling of the Returned Soldier go down the drain the very first night. Then Nick asked for a scotch.

'Wine, son. Drink a little wine. Eat a little. Then drink a little. Like we do in the Old Country. They know how to drink,' Old Pete said.

'I just came from the Old Country. And I've been drinking scotch. If you don't mind, Dad.'

'Have whatever you want,' Old Pete said not very meaningfully. 'Remember, son, what I told you. The only drunkards you ever see in Europe are Americans and Englishmen.'

'You don't mean that, Dad,' Nick grinned that half-sardonic grin. 'Why half the French army and half the Greek army, what there was of them, were drunk most of the time.'

'Aren't you going to tell us about your trip, Pete?' Mary asked. 'Aren't you going to tell Nick about the business. How it's grown.'

'Dad wrote me all about it,' Nick said. He had felt like saying, that's all he wrote me about.

'How do you think you'll like the theatre business, son?' Old Pete asked proudly.

'I haven't thought much about it, Dad.'

'Well, you come down to the office tomorrow. We got nice new offices in the Field Building. I'll show you around. You get to work next week, maybe. First of next week.'

'I don't think I'll come down tomorrow, Dad.'

'Nick needs a little rest, Pete,' Mary said. 'He just got out of the hospital, you know.'

'How come you didn't write lately, son?'

'I was on a boat three weeks, almost.'

'Yeah,' Old Pete said. 'Your cousin Pierro got a letter from you. From Paris.'

'I'm glad he got it,' Nick said. He could feel Old Pete manoeuvring now and it began to bother him.

'You're tired, kid. Didn't you get any rest on that boat?' he asked.

'You've never been on a troop ship, have you Dad?'

'I came over steerage. And went back first time steerage. Not that I didn't have the money to go better the first time back. But I saved. It didn't kill me either.'

'Those troop ships were terrible, Pete,' Mary said. 'I read all about them.'

'I saw pictures of them,' Yvonne said, 'at school. They *were* terrible overcrowded, Dad.'

'Couldn't have been worse than steerage,' Old Pete said stubbornly.

'You were just tougher stock, that's all, Dad. They don't make them like your generation anymore,' Nick said with a slight edge of sarcasm which Pete ignored.

'Well, you look great to me, son. You stay home tomorrow and visit with your mother. Then I'll take you down Saturday. By Monday you'll be all set to go to work. It's a good business, son. But you got to have experience,' Old Pete said. Nick saw Old Pete's fists clenching. 'Experience,' he almost shouted.

'I'm not going down Saturday,' Nick said eyeing Old Pete.

'Can I get you something, Nick?' Yvonne asked.

'See how you feel, Nickie,' his mother said.

'What do you mean you're not going down Saturday?' Old Pete asked as if he hadn't heard Nick correctly.

'I'm going to the races,' Nick said sipping his scotch.

'The races!' Old Pete shouted, astonished. 'The races!'

'Don't get excited now, Pete,' Mary said.

'Please, Daddy,' Yvonne said.

'That's what I said. The races,' Nick repeated.

'You learned to gamble in the army, eh, Nick?' Old Pete asked with a sudden composure; a wired composure. A control that they all could feel.

'I never gambled much.'

'Peter. Are you accusing Nick?' Mary interrupted.

'You keep out of this,' Old Pete said. 'You gambling, Nick?'

'I just got done telling you I don't gamble much. I'm going to the races with some friends. That's all.'

'Now, Pete, don't get excited,' Mary said. 'You remember what I read about our returned vets.'

'Goddamn it, Mary, can't I ask my own son a question without you interrupting.'

'Pete, watch your heart.'

'Please Daddy,' Yvonne said.

'What kind of a goddamn family I got? Is everybody against me?' He looked around with his very best slightly bewildered look. 'I work like a dog. For years. Like a dirty dog. For what? what? You think I want it for myself? For my son. My family. That's what I worked like a dog for. And my son don't even want to see his own business. Our business.'

'He didn't say he didn't want to see it,' Yvonne said.

'He's going to the races. That's how much brains he's got. He's going to the races. He hasn't got a pot to pee in and he's going to the races.'

'Peter,' Mary said as if shocked. 'Don't you talk like that in front of your daughter. I didn't raise my daughter to have to listen to such language.'

'What kind of a son you raise. Tell me that.'

'Come off it,' Nick said suddenly, angrily. 'Goddamn it, can't we stop fighting around this house for a few minutes. Do we always have to fight, fight, fight!'

'You watch how you talk in front of your mother,' Old Pete said. 'How dare you. You disrespectful punk.'

'You go to hell,' Nick said to his father for the second time in his life.

Old Pete sat there looking as if he had been suddenly, unexpectedly hit full across the face with a fraternity paddle. Then twice quickly shook his head like a fighter tossing off a punch.

'I don't want to ever hear you talk like that to your father again,' Mary Stratton said indignantly. 'War or no war, you've no right to talk to your father like that.'

Old Pete sat back in his wingback chair and put his hand up to his heart. At once Mary got up and went over to him and put her hand on his forehead, stroking it soothingly.

'Your father's too old to get this excited,' she spoke softly, soothingly.

'I'll be all right in a minute,' Old Pete said dramatically. 'Get my pills, Yvonne. They're in my coat pocket,' he said in a weak voice.

'You apologize to your father,' Mary told Nick.

Nick, his mouth still twisted slightly angrily, was staring at his father.

'Daddy hasn't been too well at times lately,' Yvonne said to Nick softly.

Nick looked over at her. She nodded her head and smiled a hurt little half-pleading smile.

He breathed deeply: 'I'm sorry, Dad,' he said. 'I guess I'm a little touchy.'

'All the boys are when they come home,' Mary said, still stroking Pete's forehead from behind his chair.

'Nick's bound to be nervous,' Yvonne said, 'his first day home.'

'I understand,' Old Pete said tiredly. 'I know he's not right. I know you wouldn't talk like that if you felt right.'

'Get your father a little cognac, Nick,' Mary said.

'Sure - sure, Mother,' Nick said.

The telephone rang. Yvonne noticed Nick's eyes twitch suddenly, frightenedly. She got up to answer it.

Nick came back with the cognac and handed it to his father.

'Happy days, son,' his father said. 'God Bless You,' he said with his eyes moistening. 'God Bless You.'

'God Bless You, Dad,' Nick said, feeling suddenly almost heartbreaking sorrow for Old Pete.

'That was Pierro,' Yvonne said, coming back from the phone. 'He said he'd stop by in a little while. I didn't tell him you were here, Nick. Will he ever be surprised,' she smiled.

He sure will, Nick thought, then looked again at his father. Old Pete *did* look old. Suddenly so very old, and sad, and afraid. He *was* so afraid, Nick knew. So terribly, terribly afraid to die. Not even in the war had Nick known anyone that clung to life as desperately as Old Pete.

Suddenly Nick wanted to put his arms around him, to tell him that everything would be all right, to tell him not to

be afraid – but he just stood there staring for a moment.

‘I’ll get another cognac, Dad,’ he said. ‘Then we’ll have a drink together. A good luck drink. All right, Dad?’

‘That’s my boy,’ Old Pete said kind of sorrowfully. ‘Soon Pierro will be here. Then we’ll all have a drink. Like old times. All the Strattons. Together.’

Nick turned abruptly and walked towards the kitchen.

Chapter Eleven

OLD Pete and Nick had their brandy together. Mary had taken Yvonne off to the kitchen – so that the men could be together, she said. An expression that had undeniably pleased Pete even more than she had anticipated.

Taking advantage of his sudden pleasure, she had quietly, before they (the men) actually began having their brandy together, called Pete aside and out of Nick’s earshot to the combination sun porch and library. There she had taken out her latest issue of *Stars Are My Guide* and read to Pete from Capricorn, which was not his month. He was a Gemini, obviously, unmistakably, anyone could tell that. She had read to him from Capricorn that today was a day in which he must be patient and considerate of loved ones. And a day in which, also, he must not attempt to exert his will upon others. Then, to make sure, she had read to him from Taurus regarding Nick, although Nick was obviously, unmistakably a Leo; anyone could tell that. Nick’s horoscope read that in the p.m. he was inclined to be irritable and not too diplomatic. And to avoid family arguments.

So, armed with this new knowledge, and feeling slightly crafty from it, Old Pete returned to the living-room honestly prepared to have a peaceful drink with his son, which he did.

Of course Nick was thrown slightly, to say the least, off balance again by his father’s change of pace; having one moment been sitting before a rather pitiful, sorrowful old man and seconds later, seemingly, sitting and talking with

a quiet amenable gentleman in apparent excellent health about the Cubs and their chances for the pennant.

It had always left Nick slightly bewildered and before he knew it he had agreed to go to the game on Sunday, and before he knew it again had agreed to go to the Old Timer's Luncheon at the Hotel Sherman on Monday after *they* had left the office. It was going to be quite an affair, as they were presenting Old Mordici Brown, Three Finger Brown as he was known, with a plaque commemorating his services not only as a baseball player but as a citizen of his community and his country. Old Pete himself had been asked to say a few words on behalf of the charter members of the Old Timers, he told Nick humbly. Adding slightly plaintively that there were only twenty-two charter members left. And then craftily quickly adding to that how short life was, how you had to take advantage of every opportunity or you would be left hopelessly by the wayside: there were two gods — Theos in Heaven; the dollar on earth. And then craftily sure that he had implanted his thought, he asked Nick about conditions in Greece.

As it turned out (Nick hadn't been in Greece in over a year) Old Pete seemed to know not only more about present conditions in Greece but more accurately about conditions in Greece during that time when Nick had been an agent there, much to Nick's astonishment and consternation. Undoubtedly half the information that Old Pete knew would have to be classified as top secret.

During this part of the conversation Mary had made a very timely interruption with a tray of her hors d'oeuvre, reminding them that they weren't to discuss the war.

Everything went fine until dinner. In fact Nick could not ever remember it having gone so well. Of course he realized that Old Pete had tricked him into coming down to the office on Monday. And knew that Old Pete realized that Nick himself realized he had been out-foxed tentatively, merely by having seen the smile on Old Pete's face the moment that Nick had unconsciously, almost hypnotically, consented to the Old Timer's luncheon.

It was really a beautiful end run Pete had pulled, Nick realized admiringly. Or would you call it a double reverse.

In any event, he told himself, it wouldn't hurt him to go down to the office. It would be interesting to see what they were like after the run-down old offices on Clark. Too, it would give Old Pete considerable pleasure. After all, he meant well. He had always meant well. Was always a good provider. And he was getting on in years. The percentages of his living much longer were not really good, as he himself had pointed out when he had referred to the charter members of the Old Timers. Only twenty-two out of the original fifty being still alive.

Yvonne was feeling good, too. While she replenished the tray of hors d'oeuvre, Nick suggested that they go out for a while after dinner, after Pierro stopped by. Perhaps take a ride, or go to a movie or something. Old Pete had thought that would be a fine idea.

And Mary was feeling good. Not only because of her triumph in getting her husband and son together, but because by sending Yvonne off on various errands such as serving the hors d'oeuvre, and upstairs to fix her hair, and down to the basement for a certain spice, she had managed during those intervals to belt about one fourth of the bottle of scotch.

So when they had all sat down for dinner they made an almost perfect picture of the ideal American family. Mary had said grace in English and Yvonne and Nick had joined her. Then Old Pete had said it in Greek, and Yvonne and Nick had joined him. And Old Pete had poured the wine, which Mary refused on the grounds that already that day she had had a drink with Nick at his request, and any more might tend to upset her.

Old Pete was sincerely very proud, Mary could tell by the way he was sitting. By the way he was heaping the food on his plate. By the happy way he toasted Nick. If it could only always be this way, she thought. Pete was truly such a dynamic man.

'We go to church this Sunday,' Old Pete was saying. 'You go this Sunday with us too, eh, Dolly,' he waved his wine glass at her. 'I'm going to call the priest in a little while and have him give a special communion to Nick. Remember Nick, no meat tomorrow. And nothing to eat after midnight Saturday.'

'I'll go if Nick wants me to,' Mary said.

'Of course Nick wants you,' Old Pete said. 'Don't you Nick?'

'Sure. Of course, Mother,' Nick said. Well, that takes care of Sunday, Nick thought. Church and the baseball game. And there was Raul's father's party. Nora said she'd go to that. I'd better call her after dinner. Maybe she could meet Yvonne and me some place.

Nick was really enjoying his dinner. The chicken had turned out very well. And they had spinach cooked in oil and vinegar with a little lemon on it, just the way Nick liked it. And there was a fine flavour to the chicken, the oregano flavour. And there was plenty of goat cheese in the salad, and Greek olives. The resinous wine was good, too. It had been a long time since Nick had had any of that. You could really eat when you drank that wine. Really, it *was* good to be home. To be with your family. They were a good family. A family to be proud of.

'Where's the ribbons, kid?' Old Pete asked. 'You ought to have plenty of ribbons.'

'I didn't wear them, Dad.'

'How many do you have, Nick?' Yvonne asked.

'I don't know. About three rows plus. Around ten, I suppose.'

'Well, you earned them,' Mary said.

'How come you don't have them on?' Pete asked, taking a mouthful of rice.

'I just don't wear them,' Nick said.

'You ought to wear them, Nick. After all you went through to get them,' Mary said.

'I didn't go through anything to get them, Mother,' he said. 'What I went through I went through to stay alive. Believe me,' he smiled.

'Then you ought to wear the ribbons, son,' Old Pete said.

'I think that's up to me, don't you Dad,' Nick said pleasantly.

I wonder what's wrong with this kid, Pete said to himself.

'Of course you'll wear your ribbons to church, won't you, Nick,' Mary said.

'Nick's the one that just got home,' Yvonne said. 'I don't

see why he should wear his ribbons if he doesn't want to. After all, they're his ribbons.'

'You keep out of this,' Old Pete said, tossing her a quick glare.

'She didn't mean anything, Pete,' Mary said.

'I don't see any reason to start anything over whether I wear my ribbons or not,' Nick said. 'I really don't see that that's very important.'

'I told you he wouldn't mind wearing them,' Mary said.

'I didn't say that, Mother.'

'You don't know how your mother worried about you, son. Nobody knows how a mother worries about her son. Your mother is proud of you, Nick.'

'Any mother would be proud of Nick.'

'You wear your ribbons, son. You make your mother proud. Okay, kid?'

'Pass the wine, Yvonne,' Nick said to his sister.

'Okay, kid?' Pete repeated.

Nick looked up at him for a moment. Christ, I wish he wouldn't pressure me like that. 'I don't know,' Nick said sullenly, then poured the wine.

'That's no way to talk to your mother,' Old Pete said, 'your first day home.' He smiled that tense, controlled smile.

'I wasn't talking to my mother,' Nick said. 'I was talking to you.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah,' Nick mimicked back.

'Some day you're going to learn a little respect, kid.'

'Not around here.'

'You're a pretty smart boy. You think just because you're a major in the army you're a pretty smart boy.'

'Now, Pete,' Mary intervened. 'It's been such a nice dinner. Let's not have any arguments. Nick's a little tired. That's all.'

'Nick's tired!' Pete said loudly. 'Nick's tired! What the hell did he do to be tired. I'm the one that worked all day. It's about time he did some real work.'

'Not for you,' Nick said.

'Yeah. Well, go get a job. Go get a job with the experience you got. What the hell you know how to do?'

'I know the Army,' Nick said. 'And you might as well know now; I'm staying in it.'

Mary Stratton put her hand to her mouth.

Yvonne kicked Nick under the table.

Pete just sat there looking like he had been slapped in the face. Then like a fighter, he shook his head, but only once this time.

'Don't joke with your father about such things,' Mary Stratton said.

'I'm not joking, Mother,' Nick said.

'The Army,' Old Pete said in that slightly bewildered way; puzzled, perplexed. 'The Army,' he repeated with a puzzled inarticulate expression.

The doorbell rang.

'It must be Pierro,' Yvonne said. 'I'll get it.'

'Now don't argue, men,' Mary said. 'Not in front of Pierro. Promise.'

'We better have a little talk, son. Later. Just you and me, son,' Old Pete said in a new voice.

Well, I got him this time, Nick thought. I finally got him. 'Well, you asked me to get a job. And I told you.'

'I wouldn't say anything about this to your cousin. He's liable to think something's wrong with you.'

'He would,' Nick said.

'Now that's no way to talk about Pierro,' Old Pete said. 'You and Pierro are like brothers.'

'He may be a son to you, but he's no brother of mine.'

'We talk it over later, okay son? You and me. We'll leave Pierro out of this. This is between you and me. Okay, son?'

'Of course, Pete,' Mary answered for Nick. 'Nick didn't mean what he said. Nick's not trying to upset you. He's just tired, that's all. I told you the boy was tired. Don't you remember, Peter, what I read you on the porch.'

'Pierro's here,' Yvonne hollered from the porch.

Chapter Twelve

PIERRO had not really intended to take the actress Marci Preston to the buffet in Lake Forest. That is, he had not really directly asked her. The day before he had met her shortly after his arrival at a cocktail party a school chum's parents had given at their apartment on Lake Shore. Later that evening they had by chance drifted into the same group when Charlie Wilson had invited them to his buffet. Marci, who had been in New York, Hollywood, and on the road for the past several years, mentioned that she would be glad to accept, but besides having no car, she didn't drive and didn't think she ought to impose on any of her family to make the drive from Evanston to Lake Forest - they were short of stamps as it was. How did she go about going by train?

At this point Charlie Wilson's wife suggested that Pierro bring her along, Pierro being the only bachelor in that particular group and Charlie Wilson's wife being the kind of person that enjoyed the role of the matchmaker on any scale. Pierro, for a change not irritated by one of Mrs Wilson's suggestions, said it would be a pleasure. And at the time it seemed acceptable to Marci. So, knowing they were going to be 'together' the next evening, they had made an effort to get better acquainted.

She had quite a background, Pierro found out quickly. In fact, they found out after a few moments that they had both been at the Sorbonne at the same time and had many mutual friends, both European and American. Her grandfather had been a successful Chicago engineer and her father, who was paralytic, had never worked. For a while, before the depression, they had spent the seasons in Palm Beach and Northeast Harbor in Maine. Marci had been to Europe seven times and was schooled in Switzerland as well as France, and tutored for one year in Italy. She had had very little formal schooling in America, though she

did spend one semester at Smith during the depression years. The depression had wiped away a considerable portion of the family income, though they still lived comfortably, and when the war came she had gone to New York and studied dramatics. She had always had a flair for the stage, she had told him, but was not completely devoted to it and didn't think that she ever would be, though she had enjoyed the experience more than anything in her lifetime.

Pierro arrived at her home promptly at six for cocktails. She greeted him at the front door in a plain white summer dress. She was really a very imposing woman, he thought as he looked at her standing in the doorway of the large old grey stucco house of sixteen rooms that overlooked the cliff and the lake. She was tall and red-haired, in a way almost august in appearance, and she was not what Pierro would call buxom, nor thin, but rather well proportioned in a Scandinavian sort of way. She was, in fact, she had told Pierro previously the day before at the party, predominantly Swedish. And later by a subtle probing Pierro had found out she was actually sixth generation American.

Her manner as she greeted him was gay, almost forward. And they went out on the porch where a grey-haired old Negro servant served them a cocktail with her father. Pierro chatted with him unconstrainedly after he found that Mr Preston had himself been doing graduate work in engineering at MIT when he was stricken with the paralysis that had left one side of his body totally paralyzed and which impaired his speech considerably. He seemed genuinely interested in Pierro's architectural background, and then asked Pierro if by chance he were any relation to Old Pete Stratton. And when Pierro cautiously, but not visibly so, replied that he was, Mr Preston began to explain with all the romantic enthusiasm of a shut-in what a character Old Pete had been in the days of The Mill; expounded with all the embellishments that Old Pete would have secretly loved what Old Pete had accomplished since he had come to America; expounded with a respect and admiration and friendliness for Old Pete that genuinely irritated Pierro and made him feel suddenly quite uncomfortable and anxious to leave. Nevertheless, Pierro said he

would be happy to give his regards to Old Pete from Mr Preston. In fact, if it were all right with Marci, they would be stopping by Old Pete's on the way to Lake Forest.

Much to Pierro's relief, they left after one cocktail, and as they walked towards the car, she stopped for a moment and looked out over the lake that was a darker blue now that the sun was setting behind them. And now the tall trees were quiet, and the living creatures quiet too, all quiet with the setting sun and the day's end.

'How I love this old place,' she said. 'This has always been home. Since I can remember.'

For a moment Pierro thought of his own dark room in the dingy two-storey walkup, and then of how much this reminded him of Nick's home; that was not really his, Pierro's, home as much as Mary had tried to make him believe that it was his home, really, too. But somehow it would never be his home, no matter how Mary tried.

'I don't think I've been here this time of year since I've been a child,' she said.

'This is a big year for coming home,' Pierro said.

They continued walking towards the car and got in and started.

'We don't really have to stop at my aunt's,' he said.

'I'd like to.'

'Fine, then,' he said. 'My Aunt Mary did want me to stop by. But we won't stay long. I think you'll like her.'

'Good,' she smiled. 'You see, I'm curious. After what Father said. And Charlie Wilson told me about what a promising architect you are. I want to see what kind of family makes such a promising young man.'

'Are men made?' he asked with that reserve that was so much a reserve, she thought, that it could have been taken either as an aloofness or even as a sarcasm. 'Or do they make themselves?'

'Both I think,' she laughed, as if at his seriousness, he thought.

They were driving north now along the Lake and he took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and went to offer her one, but she took the pack from his hand: 'I'll light them,' she said.

'I think you'll find my uncle a very eccentric man,' he

said, as if not noticing that she had taken the cigarettes.

'He must be. You don't get along?'

'Not too well,' he said. 'We shouldn't, I suppose. I mean, we come from different countries. We have the difference of years. And strangely, I suppose, of background.'

'Doesn't he have any family? I mean besides you.'

'Oh yes. A son a few years younger than I am. Nick. And a daughter who will soon be eighteen.'

'What does Nick do? A professional man, too?'

'You are curious,' he turned and grinned at her suddenly. He had white even teeth, and suddenly she noticed how anciently fine was his head, how dark the skin, not as if burned layer upon layer from the sun, but dark with an ancientness of history, and she was suddenly slightly astonished and perplexed by the contrariness of the grin to the reserved way that was his.

'Nick's in Paris. In the hospital. I don't know what he'll be. He's rather odd. Brilliant in a way, I think. But stubborn. And wild, at times. It's funny, as close as we've been, I don't think I know him too well.'

'You get along.'

'Not really. I mean on the outside. But often, Marci, I felt that somehow we do. I can't explain it, really. As a matter of fact, we always fought when we were younger.'

'And he always won.'

'No, I did. And that was strange, too. Because he always fought a lot. And licked tough boys. He had a reputation for being tough. And I never fought anyone except him. And he never did lick me.'

'And whose side did Aunt Mary take?'

'Aunt Mary always takes the loser's side.'

'And Uncle Pete the winner's?' she smiled.

'Yes,' he laughed suddenly. 'Always.' He threw his head back laughing earthily, contrarily to the reserved way he appeared. Then began to twist one end of his black moustache.

Then suddenly it occurred to him how much he had told her about his family. More really, in this little time, than he had ever told anyone except Gyorki, and just as suddenly he stopped laughing and drove silently on, wondering why he had said what he had said, especially about

Nick. Was he trying to impress her, he wondered. He had never gotten along with Nick. Or Old Pete. Never, with any of them except Mary and Yvonne. What was wrong with him? He was no ordinary Stratton. He might look like one. And have the name. But he was no Stratton. Not really. He was himself, goddamn it. And he would stay himself. And the first chance he had tomorrow he was going to send Old Pete a cheque for two-fifty. He'd be goddamned if he'd sell himself to anyone for anything, much less to Old Pete for two-fifty. How utterly stupid and easy he must have thought you were when you took that cheque, he said to himself, suddenly infuriated; infuriated with that sense of thwart and guilt that he would sometimes get, and only ever be able to get over, it seemed, by hours and hours of work at his draughting table. Stratton. A goddamn Stratton, he was saying to himself. But outside of a tightness of his lips, his face remained an expressionless mask. A syphilitic Stratton, he finally said it to himself. A syphilitic Stratton, he wanted to scream and get it over with.

She did not know what it was, what he was thinking of. She could see the tightness of his lips, and noticed once the sudden whiteness of his knuckles on his anciently dark hands as they gripped the steering wheel, but she felt the tension, felt it mounting and mounting, and doubled it seemed, by the mounting silence, and redoubled by its very suppression; a fierce, savage, violent yet somehow controlled tension that suddenly began to actually frighten her, as if he were not really now in control of all his faculties, and at the same time held her with an awesome and strange fascination, and suddenly she noticed how pointed were his ears, and then he spoke, quietly and reservedly.

'Are you going back to the theatre?'

She didn't answer for a moment.

'Oh yes. I mean I've read a play I like very much. But that won't be until fall. I'm going to New England later this summer, though. For stock.'

'I never cared much. I liked it. But I wasn't what you'd

'Did you think you'd make good when you started?'
call stage-struck. I'm still not. Though it's a considerable

satisfaction for a girl of my background to see her name up in lights. And to know she got there herself.'

'I think caring too much can hurt your work.'

'I'm sure of it,' she said. 'Or too little. That can be worse.'

And they drove along talking about the theatre for a while, then about what the war had done to America, and she asked him about the war and he told her how he was wounded and had almost died. And told her how silly, how stupidly silly we were to still fight wars, and soon they pulled up in front of the Stratton's, and as they walked up the porch steps they could hear voices from the dining room. They rang the bell and waited, and soon he saw Yvonne coming towards the door.

Chapter Thirteen

PIERRO introduced Marci to Yvonne and they went into the living room.

'In the dining room, Pierro,' Yvonne said smiling that slightly mischievous smile.

They all walked in together and before Pierro realized it he was staring down at Nick. He just stood staring unbelievably for seconds, his mouth half-open, and no one speaking, waiting.

'Hello, *Greek*,' Nick said finally, smiling that slightly sardonic smile.

'My God! Nick!' Pierro said. 'You look - terrible.'

Nick laughed.

'Pierro,' Mary said. 'Nick looks wonderful.'

Nick looked over at Marci and his eyes remained fixed on her for a moment with that unintentional but nevertheless slightly hungry and invading look, then he got up and came around the oval teak dining room table and embraced Pierro and kissed him on the cheek. And Pierro, before he realized what he was doing, had kissed Nick back on the other cheek. And they backed away and stood

there staring at each other for a moment as if they had both gone lunatic for having done what they just did. It was the first time they had kissed since Old Pete had caught them fighting the last time and made them, Nick remembered.

'Well, aren't you going to introduce us,' Nick said. 'Don't tell me the Army took your manners, too.'

Pierro was standing slightly flushed now, embarrassed by having been carried away in front of his new acquisition, Nick could tell.

Old Pete was sitting in his master chair and there was a satisfied smile on his face, and his eyes were slightly misty again. 'My family,' his voice trembled slightly. 'All together again. Mary - my family.'

'Well,' Nick said again to Pierro.

Finally Pierro introduced Marci around and Old Pete asked them to sit down and Mary went for brandy for them.

'This is quite a surprise,' Pierro said.

'He looks great, eh, Pierro,' Old Pete said.

'He looks terrible,' Pierro said. 'Terrible. What ever happened, Nick?'

Nick grinned. 'The same thing that happened to a lot of people,' Nick said. 'I'm here. I'm not complaining.'

'You're so -'

'Old,' Nick said.

'Pierro,' Mary said.

'Are you - are you out?' Pierro asked slightly awkwardly.

'Not yet,' Nick said, then quickly glanced over at Old Pete. Well, Nick thought, I might as well throw it in now. 'In fact,' Nick said to Pierro, but eyeing Old Pete, 'I'm staying in for a while.'

'You mean voluntarily?'

'Voluntarily,' Nick said triumphantly.

Old Pete jerked upwards a moment, then quickly suppressed his shock.

'What are you doing, *Greek*?' Nick asked Pierro.

Greek. It knifed into Pierro as nicely, as easily as it always had when Nick said it the way he did. He glared at Nick.

There was a silence.

'Or should I say what are you *going* to do?' Nick asked.

Pierro sat there still hurt and glaring for a moment, then his eyes lowered and he dumped his cigarette ash into a tray methodically, then holding the cigarette between his fingers as if it were some gentle and delicate thing, he said:

'I haven't really decided, Nick. I was thinking of going on to Bloomfield Hills for a while,' he said, conscious of Old Pete's eyes on him. 'To work on the cities project. You know of that. But I thought I'd rest for a few weeks now. You know I was hurt rather severely.'

Mary had come in with the brandy while Pierro was talking. 'We'll never know what our boys went through,' she said dramatically. Then in a completely new voice: 'Marci, dear, would you like a little crème de cacao with yours?'

Marci smiled warmly. 'No thank you, Mrs Stratton.'

'I would,' Yvonne said.

'You've had enough brandy,' Old Pete said.

'I don't come home every day,' Nick said to Old Pete, then quickly eyed Pierro.

'Really, uncle,' Pierro said, 'this *is* an occasion.'

'See what I mean, Marci,' Old Pete said suddenly smiling charmingly. 'I don't know how long it's been since I won a vote around here.'

'But you win the elections, I bet,' Marci said with a deliberate and obvious flirtatiousness that obviously pleased Old Pete.

'It doesn't take a woman long to get your number, Pete Stratton,' Mary said.

'Better have some brandy, Yvonne,' Old Pete said smiling charmingly again. 'You can't beat women. They run everything nowadays. Everything, I say. Bowling was never a success until women took to it. And cigarettes were never a real success until women started smoking. Remember that, Nick,' Old Pete said. 'When women take to anything nowadays, there's money in it. You remember that too, Pierro.'

Marci laughed.

'You can't do anything without the dollar,' Old Pete said, puffing his cigar. 'The mighty dollar.' Then picking

up his brandy glass, 'To our boys. To Pierro and Nick.'

They drank around.

Then Marci gave her regards to Old Pete from her father. Pete remembered her father well, and her grandfather too. He sent his regards right back.

'What do you think about Nick staying in?' Pierro asked Old Pete now. He had thought about asking it before but it was really such a delightful question for him to ask Old Pete that he hadn't been able to resist savouring it for a while first.

'If Nick likes the Army, that's his business,' Old Pete said without hesitation. 'Of course, Pierro, I don't like it. What father would. The way I worked all my life building up this business for my son. My family. What man would like it? But if Nick's made up his mind, I guess it's made up - I'll carry on some way. If it kills me, I will,' Old Pete said, and reached into his pocket and pulled out his pill box. 'Yvonne, get me some water,' he added stoically. And then sat there unconcernedly and knowing that he had made the correct play and had not only thrown Nick off balance but Mary and Yvonne, too, and at the same time, probably, allied Pierro to his cause.

'Why the Army, Nick?' Pierro asked.

Nick sat there feeling not at all out-manoeuvred but sincerely hurt and bewildered that *his* father could so cold-bloodedly dismiss him from *his* life - what kind of a man was this, Nick wondered, who would take the responsibility of bringing you into this world and then didn't even care what happened to you. Didn't he know anything of love? Was his love buried in his ignorance, too?

'What else do I know except the Army?' Nick said, his eyes shifting quickly to his father who was staring indifferently at his cigar.

'You'll never stay in,' Pierro said to Nick. 'You weren't constructed for it.'

'What am I constructed for, *Greek*?' Nick asked.

'You'll have to find that out,' Pierro said softly.

I suppose that's so goddamn easy, Nick said to himself. I suppose he thinks everyone is like him. Knows what they want from the time they're twelve on. And knows how to go about getting it. The superior, snobbish bastard.

'It's not easy for some guys,' Nick said. 'For most of us.'

'I think you both talk crazy now,' Old Pete said. 'The kid's got the world by the tail and don't know it. I'd like to have had half the chance he's got. A fifth of the chance - what's he going to do? My God. A big business for him to step into. Handed to him. And he wants to stay in the Army. What kind of a son we got? What kind of a son you raise, Mary?'

'I guess we never will understand each other, Dad,' Nick said.

'I'll never understand you,' Old Pete said. 'I'll tell you that. You get hit in the head or something?'

'Peter!' Mary exclaimed.

'Don't it look like I got hit in the head,' Nick said, and belted his brandy down.

'Don't you dare talk to my son like that,' Mary continued to Old Pete.

'Get me some brandy, Yvonne, please,' Nick said.

'Daddy didn't mean it,' Yvonne said to Nick.

'I know,' Nick said to her.

'See, Mary,' Old Pete said, 'I didn't say anything wrong. You took it wrong.'

Mary turned her head as if she hadn't heard. 'I apologize, Marci, for all of us,' Mary said as if Marci were the only one in the room who could possibly comprehend the dignified way in which she had said it, and at the same time momentarily feeling the warm assuredness of her dignified American heritage. You couldn't *buy* that. 'Everyone's a little excited - Nick coming home so unexpectedly.'

'It's really not very polite,' Pierro sided with Mary.

Then Pierro began to tell them about Marci and her background, which, because of Mary's recent dignified statement, they were all compelled to listen to attentively and politely so as to at least partially compensate for their inadequate consideration for a guest.

And Nick, assured of Marci's attention to Pierro, invaded her again. He was looking out of the corner of his eye at the dress strap that fell slightly off one shoulder now, and the way her red hair came forward on the right side almost to her eye, and then back at the shoulder strap which, hanging as it was, dropped the dress slightly on that

side so that the smooth white but slightly freckled upper ski-run slide of her right breast was exposed slightly, then craftily he turned and very attentively listened to Pierro, who was now temporarily sidelined on the subject of Marci and was speaking of a mutual friend at the Sorbonne, and while very attentively listening to Pierro, slyly turned in his seat and raised up slightly and craftily looked back at the exposed welling of white flesh, earnestly contemplating whether or not she had on a bra, which he finally, delightedly, decided she did not.

And now that the story of Marci had entered the conversation Old Pete seemed to be intrigued. Show business was in his blood. Ever since he had bought his first small tavern (he was twenty-one then) he had been in the entertainment business in one form or another. Many of the personalities that had started out with small acts had played the two places Pete had had before The Mill, played The Mill, and were now big names. And every name act in the country, practically, did at least one engagement at The Mill when they did Chicago, unless of course they were on one of the circuits. So Pete had a host of friends in the business and the manager of the theatre in New York that Marci had last played turned out to be an old and dear friend of Old Pete. And as much as Old Pete was intrigued merely by talking about *the* business, Marci seemed equally intrigued by Pete's tales of the famous entertainers of an earlier era. Only once were Marci and Old Pete interrupted once they got going, and that was when Mary had suggested that Old Pete be sure and tell Marci about his old girl friend, herself a famous entertainer.

After that interruption Old Pete cleverly changed the topic of conversation. He began to tell Marci about the old, old days when he had lived in a hay loft in a car barn on Halstead Street, existing on olives and cheese and Greek bread and saving his money and how, when he had first come to this country, to Chicago, he was twelve then, he had worked for a distant cousin of his, an old bushy-moustached man, worked twelve to eighteen hours a day in a fruit stand while his cousin got drunk on resinous wine and played casino in the Greek coffee houses. Old Pete had

worked those hours just for his keep and occasional hand-me-downs. And often, he told Marci, he had dozed off because of the long hours attending the stand and he would be awakened abruptly by his cousin who had drunkenly, unexpectedly returned; awakened by flames from a newspaper the cousin had ignited and then thrust into his face.

Marci was enchanted by Old Pete's tales of a younger America, Nick could tell. But at the same time, he could also tell, the stories were causing Pierro considerable discomfort. A discomfort that Nick seemed to relish more and more, a mounting discomfort which Nick finally decided he himself would amplify, which he did by telling the story of how Al Capone had hi-jacked Old Pete's whisky from his warehouse near The Mill and how, after a phone call from Old Pete, Capone had replaced the entire amount, with a little extra thrown in, as well as his apologies. I swear, Al had said, I didn't know that was your stuff, Pete.

Nick did not have to look at Pierro to know the anguish this last tale caused him. And after a moment Pierro said that they had better be getting along, but Old Pete suggested that they have another drink.

Then Nick told Marci of his first visit to his father's home town in Greece. It had taken them (Nick was a child then) a day and a half by donkey to get there. He told her of the shawled old women with their wrinkled faces, almost all of whom were his relatives, and of the big feast they had with people coming from miles around and how the old women had taken off his, Nick's, shoes and bathed and kissed his feet. And how they had hugged him, and kissed him, and cried out of the pure joy of seeing him. And how strange it was to sleep on straw bedding and drink from a well. And how beautiful was the hill country that surrounded the town; rocky and barren and ancient. Stripped was the country, it seemed, to a bare ancient essentialness. And how truly the town people reflected the land. As if they were not born upon the earth but born of the very earth they tended with such tender care. Their hands lined like the crevices of the soil, faces ruddy and scorched by the winds and the suns, hearts that felt the land was really God's (for it provided), so they treated it almost sacredly. And smiles, white even smiles and bro-

ken-toothed old smiles on the dark faces because long long ago they had learned to provide even their own joy. That was only fair, they seemed to say, to provide your own joy. For life provided sorrow enough. And man was born to live with his maker and in man's happiness, as opposed to this life's sorrow - life would have an equality.

This sudden, almost sacred testament by Nick for his father's land seemed to instil, if but for a moment, a calmness and tranquillity about the table. And Nick himself, Marci thought, slightly intrigued by his sudden change of pace (even if it did border on the esoteric), did not really seem to be speaking to them, but rather to himself.

'I have a cousin, Marci,' Nick said as if still speaking to himself, as if, Pierro thought, he was a little drunk. 'An old man. He has a face like Christ, yet many in his home town, and here, claim he is evil. He lives in a shack now, with three goats, on a lot that my father owns on the North Side -'

'Not mine,' Old Pete interrupted. 'Our lot.'

'And when you look at Old Gus,' Nick continued as if he hadn't heard the interruption, 'or are near him you wonder why we complicate things as we do. What compels us to live as we live, as opposed to the way these hill people live. . . . Pierro should introduce you to Old Gus some time.'

'I'd like to meet him,' Marci said, interested.

'He's odd, that fellow is,' Old Pete said. 'He knows things before they happen.'

'The Greeks are very superstitious, you know,' Pierro said to Marci. 'Really, it's almost a medieval superstition that exists in the Spartan country today.'

'Pierro's just ashamed that he's Greek, Marci,' Nick said, grinning sardonically. 'I don't know why. He makes some profound statements about wars being caused by our racial heritage or our national pride, but he offers no solution like most so-called intellectuals.'

'I think you've had too much to drink,' Pierro said. 'I thought you'd have outgrown that by now.'

'But this is what really gets me,' Nick said and took another drink. 'This is the only country in the world where nationalities blend, and Pierro thinks we're unciv-

ilized compared to Europeans. Primarily, I think, because he's never really explored America. He exploits, all right. We all do that. But never really explored it. If we go to Europe we try to explore wherever we go. But not here.'

'The native America, what we call the grass roots America,' Marci said, 'is a superstitious lot itself.'

'Agreed,' Nick said. 'But I think as long as you're born with certain national characteristics, you should use them instead of trying to bury them. The Greeks are a passionate race. Emotional. Pierro thinks of that as being a crudeness, don't you, Pierro?'

'A civilized man controls his emotions. And understands them. I think that's something you haven't learned yet, Nick,' Pierro said surely.

Nick thought that Pierro had learned to control his emotions, there was no doubt. Nick had known Pierro ever since he could first recollect, and up until the time that Pierro was in high school he was as emotional as any Stratton. More so in fact, in lots of ways. For a second Nick wondered if that was the secret (controlling your emotions) of getting what you wanted. And if it was, was it worth it? was it worth the feeling you had to give up? the living you had to give up? Maybe, though, Pierro hadn't really learned to control his emotions. Maybe he had just learned to direct them. Sure, that was what he did. And what was difficult about directing your emotions if you had a ready-made place in which to direct them. But what are you going to do with your emotions if you don't know where to direct them? What are you going to do with the sensitivity if you can't direct that? Kill it. Just kill it off and go around acting *civilized* as that sonofabitch put it. It was so goddamn easy for him.

Then accidentally Nick glanced over towards Marci, who was staring as if contemplating, almost as if captivated by a lace-edged Irish linen handkerchief that was on the table to the right of Yvonne's drink, and which Yvonne was fingering. Then Pierro mentioned again that they had better be getting along, but then Mary began to tell Marci about her last trip abroad and what was Marci's opinion - would Paris ever be the same again?

Pierro was saying again that really they had better be

getting on. Then Nick's eyes caught Marci's hands working surreptitiously towards Yvonne's handkerchief (lace-edged Irish linen) and he looked up, and her blue eyes were darting about the table excitedly, then her hand clamped over the handkerchief and she surreptitiously pulled it towards her, then down into her lap, then out of the corner of his eye Nick saw her slip it into the pocket of her dress, her blue eyes still darting excitedly. Inwardly Nick grinned. In fact, he almost laughed out loud. Then after a moment, Nick suggested that on the way back from Lake Forest, Pierro and Marci stop by Los Caballeros for at least one drink with Yvonne and him. Pierro politely said they'd try, but not to count on them.

'Well, I just thought we'd get together for once, my first night home,' Nick said as if he would be extremely hurt if Pierro denied his invitation.

God, Yvonne giggled to herself, how very much Nick was like Old Pete at times.

'We'll try,' Pierro said.

'I knew you would,' Nick said humbly, and slightly plaintively.

Then Mary told Pierro to please come back soon and to please bring back Marci when he came, she was such a lovely girl.

And Nick sat back in his chair listening to Pierro and Mary and suddenly Nick was grinning a knowing silly little boy grin at Marci and she eyed him for a moment as if indeed he were a little boy; a smug little boy who ought to have his ass paddled soundly.

Then Pierro helped Marci up and they left.

They all stood in the doorway waving them goodbye, then Nick started towards the stairs. He was going up to call Nora from where he would have some privacy. 'I'll be down in a few minutes,' he said.

'Nick,' Old Pete said, 'you really think you ought to take your sister to that kind of place?'

'What kind of place?'

'That roadhouse. That cabaret,' Old Pete said.

'Please Daddy,' Yvonne said.

For a second Nick felt like everything was closing in on him and that he would scream. Then, seeing that sorrow-

ful, disappointed look on Yvonne's face, he said: 'I'll take good care of her, Dad.' Then lied, 'We won't stay there long. We'll probably just go to a movie and then drop by there for a short while. All right?'

'All right, son,' Old Pete said. 'But remember, she's your sister. It's your duty to protect your sister.'

Everyone's not an old whoremonger like you, Nick felt like saying. But instead: 'I know, Dad.' He felt suddenly tired. Old and tired.

'And I want you to get up early,' Old Pete said, sensing that Nick would agree to about anything at this moment. 'We ought to have a little talk. Just you and me. Even if you stay in the Army, you got to know about our affairs. I'm getting up in years, son. I could go any day,' he said. 'And somebody has to take care of your mother and sister. I'll wake you.'

'My car running?' Nick asked after a moment.

'We use it once in a while,' Old Pete said. 'But we keep it at Sam's Garage. Mary, call Sam and tell him to send Nick's car over.'

'Thanks for the dinner, Mother,' Nick smiled at her. Then walked over from the foot of the stairs to where she stood by the concert grand and kissed her. 'I sure have a beautiful mother,' he said warmly. Then turned and went upstairs.

'You go and freshen up,' Mary said to Yvonne. 'I'll take care of things in the kitchen.'

'O thank you, Mother,' Yvonne said. She went excitedly up the stairs.

And Nick called Nora and her answering service answered and said they didn't know when she was expected.

Chapter Fourteen

NICK and Yvonne got out of the house about as fast as it was humanly possible for two people to dress and get out

of a house when you took into consideration that one was a woman, and also took into consideration the pre-departure lecture (it was almost what you might call a sermon) that Old Pete had delivered.

Yvonne had on a yellow cotton shirtmaker dress with a tapered skirt and the sleeves rolled up above her elbows as if deliberately exposing the fine olive Grecian skin of her arms, and around her neck was a chiffon scarf knotted on the side. Nick really couldn't get over how she had grown. There she was, his sister, sitting next to him a grown woman.

'What would you like to do?' Nick asked her.

They were driving south, towards the city.

'I don't care. Whatever you'd like. Let's stop somewhere and have a drink. Then we'll decide.'

'You drink pretty good.'

'Damn good, Nick. I don't know why I just seem to be able to hold it.'

Nick smiled. They drove a way and stopped on Sheridan Road and had a drink and decided that first they would go down to Old Pete's lot and pay a visit to Gus. Then from there go on out to Los Caballeros where Nick's old school chums hung out. As they came out of the bar Nick noticed a flower shop across the street and taking Yvonne by the hand went over there and bought her the biggest orchid in the place, and a dozen roses to take home to Mary. It turned out that florist was a Greek and Nick spoke to him in the native tongue and told him that he had just come back, and the Greek got some cognac out of the back and the three of them had a drink together, and some laughs, and then the Greek didn't want to take the money for Yvonne's orchid, but Nick insisted.

It was a little after nine as they drove south and there was still a little daylight, but cooling slightly now so that Yvonne put a sweater over her shoulders and came over and sat close to Nick and giggled in that mischievous way and told him she hoped at least one of her girl friends would see her and wonder where she got him.

All the way down to the lot they talked and laughed about all the mischievous things they had done together when they were small; like taking all the tyres out of their

garage and piling them on the wagon Nick had built and then taking them down to a junk dealer and selling them. And the time up in Wisconsin that Nick had rented the sailboat after telling the man at the rental place that he had his own sailboat on Lake Michigan when he had never been in a sailboat before. And he and Yvonne had taken it out and when they had tried to dock it they had crashed into the pier and smashed the boat and Old Pete had to pay the damages. And about the time that Yvonne had taken her mother's diamond wristwatch and buried it in the yard and Old Pete thought the house was robbed and had called the police, and how, accidentally, the dog had dug it up and then Mary had found out it was Yvonne who had taken it and though Mary didn't want to tell Old Pete she had to because the insurance company had already paid Mary off - Mary couldn't have that on her conscience.

Then they came into the district where Old Pete's lot was and Nick asked Yvonne how Old Gus was and she said fine, she had seen him several weeks before when he had been out to the house to cook some lamb for Old Pete.

They pulled up in front of the lot with the big buildings all around it, and from where they parked they could see a light in the shack that was tin-roofed, one room, and leaned over slightly. There were three goats grazing near the shack, they could see, though it was almost dark, and as they walked towards it, they heard Gus playing his zither and singing in Greek and could smell the stew that was cooking inside.

Nick held Yvonne's arm firmly as they walked across the lot and they went up to the door and Nick knocked and Gus asked who it was.

'A friend,' Nick said, camouflaging his voice.

'Nickie,' Gus said, and opened the door.

Nick looked at the old man as he stood there in his black work boots with his baggy old brown pants and wide suspenders and his brown khaki workshirt, slightly stooped, with that sweet sad smile and the almost shaved grey-black hair, and those kind melancholy eyes that seemed to say everything that there was to be said. Nick just stood there perfectly still looking into those eyes; and finally

Gus came forward and took Nick's head in his huge bony hands and kissed Nick on the forehead and then for a moment held Nick's head on his shoulder and patted him on the back.

'Nickie,' he smiled that sweet sad smile. 'I've been waiting for you.'

There was a long wooden table with several chairs in the centre of the room, and a cot in the corner that was neatly made, and from nails on the walls hung goatskins of water and wine. There was a plain wooden crucifix at the head of the bed. And on a shelf near the bed was a Bible, several small stones, and jars of seeds lined up neatly. The room was remarkably clean, the wooden floor scrubbed spotless, as was the tub and one burner stove. Over the big centre table where the zither was was a solitary electric light bulb. Except for the pots and pans and an old steamer trunk that was at the foot of the bed, there wasn't another thing in the room. Nick looked carefully around the room that had not changed one bit since he had last been here, and which many would call a true stoic's room, which it was not, Nick knew, as no true stoic would ever cook and eat as much as Old Gus did. So barren, so void of colour, so simple, Nick thought, and yet how many peaceful happy hours he had spent here. It seemed that this was the only place that he had ever been with Old Pete and not had an argument of some kind. In fact he couldn't recall ever having heard a real argument of any kind here at Gus's.

Gus motioned them to sit down at the table and went over and took down a goatskin full of wine and picked up a glass and gestured whether they wanted their wine from the skin or the glass, and Nick pointed to the skin. Gus came over and Yvonne held her head back and he poured the wine so that it funnelled in a small stream from about six inches above her mouth, and she gulped several large gulps of the resinous wine and motioned when she had had her fill. Then Gus poured for Nick, then for himself, and sat down and hung the wine from a small nail that protruded from the end of the table.

'You are older, Nickie,' Gus said.

Nick knew that Gus did not mean the way he looked.

'I don't know what the hell to do,' Nick said, then tried

to smile, to make a joke of it, but unable to hide an enormous sense of relief, as if what he had said was truly a confession.

'And you are anxious to do this,' Old Gus said simply. 'Whatever it is you don't know.'

There was a momentary silence. 'I guess that's about it,' Nick said.

'Well, why do anything then,' Old Gus said, 'until your nature tells you there is something you must do - you know you can't hurry nature, Nick. It takes nine months to make a man child. And nine weeks to make a puppy. And your bowels move when nature, not you, moves them. There's nothing you can do about it,' Gus hunched his shoulders and laughed. And Nick and Yvonne laughed.

And then Nick told Gus that he had finally seen Mount Athos and it was everything Gus had said it was, and more, and told Yvonne how it rises up like a pyramid to the summit which is one great white marble slab, and how he had seen the reflection of the white marble stone in the moonlight. And near the mountain he had hidden for a while in a monastery at Karyes and spent the days examining the Byzantine relics stored there and seen with his own eyes the remains of the canal that Xerxes had cut over four hundred years before the birth of Christ.

Then he told how his friend, and Gus's, Dimitri, had been hung by the Communists, and of the warfare in the hills of Greece, and what a mix-up it was with the British guerillas having one policy, the Americans another, and the Commies another, and on top of all that, the Germans.

Then Gus poured some more wine and Nick asked him to play a lament on the zither, which he did; then he played a wild Greek song called 'I'll Smash Everything' and Nick took a handkerchief out of his pocket and stood up and Yvonne took the other end of the handkerchief and Nick, snapping his fingers, led Yvonne around the table in a Greek dance as Gus played faster and faster, and round and round they went, and finally breathless, they stopped and sat down laughing.

Then Gus offered them sweets which they accepted, and drank some more wine and Gus said, 'Why don't you go

up north to Wisconsin to the woods for a while and fish - the fishing will be good now.'

'I'm a little restless, Gus,' Nick said. 'Maybe in a couple of weeks. We'll go together, all right?'

'I'll go fishing any time - I get some fine perch from the Lake now. Did you fish at all during the war?'

'Twice - I caught a catfish in Burma that weighed eighty-eight pounds. They have much bigger ones there.'

'That's some big catfish.'

'We salted it lightly and wrapped it in banana leaves and cooked it between hot stones, then salted it again. I've never had better fish.'

'That's a good way to bake,' Old Gus said. 'I have not baked fish like that in a long time. Tell me, though, do the banana leaves make a special flavour?'

'I cannot describe the flavour, but there is none better for my taste.'

'I wonder if it would be possible to get any banana leaves here,' Gus said.

'You might try down on Water Market. That is where the bananas come in.'

'Must the leaves be fresh then?'

'The fresher the better.'

'I would like to try that. Would you like a cucumber? I have some fine cucumbers in the garden.'

'Already?' Nick asked.

'I had a feeling it would be an early season.'

'Wait,' Gus said and got up and went outside and came back in with two large cucumbers and sliced them and handed a piece to Yvonne and another to Nick, then passed them the salt shaker. They ate all of the cucumbers and then had another drink of the wine.

'You aren't going to work for your father,' Gus said.

'I don't think so, Gus. Not for a while anyhow.'

'I thought as much. Take care, Nick. Take care of yourself. Every man has value.'

'If I only believed that fully,' Nick said.

'You believe in God,' Yvonne said. 'You haven't stopped believing in God, Nick.'

'I think I have only stopped believing in myself sometimes, Yvonne. That's much the same thing, I think.'

'You think right there,' Gus said. 'All that is of good or evil is in the attitude of the will. You cannot truly live to please other men. Simply because you don't have their will. You will try. Because you have been raised to try. And for a moment, a second, you may touch another man's will. But that is all. We forget so easily we always have our own will.'

'I believe in God,' Yvonne said.

'I think you do,' Nick said. 'I think you even believe in the church.'

'No, I don't think I believe in the church. I believe in the habit of it.'

'The church will not hurt you,' Old Gus said.

'Some church we got,' Nick said. 'Lou Duck is the head of it. And Old Pete is the head of Lou Duck.'

Gus laughed.

'When are we going to have some dandelion greens?' Nick asked.

'Any time.'

'Monday?'

'I'll go to the park Sunday and pick them.'

'I'll come eat with you, Nick,' Yvonne said.

'Good,' Nick said. 'What will you do if Old Pete puts up a building here after the war?'

'There are other lots. I'm not worried. You want lamb with the greens? I have a lamb I have been feeding on thyme so that it has the true flavour of hill lamb that has fed on thyme. I will slaughter it.'

'Good,' Nick said.

'When are we going to have lamb testicles again, Gus?' Yvonne asked.

'I think I can get some next month.'

'You won't forget me,' she said.

'I will find out when I go to get the lamb Sunday. I have it in a barn near Halstead Street.'

'I heard many things about you when I was in Verdamah that I didn't know.'

'I suppose.'

'Don't you ever want to go back?' Nick asked.

'I am content,' Gus said.

'But everybody wants to go back. Or goes back.'

'Everyone has a different will,' Old Gus said.

'Nick, I have made up a new song. I think it is more of an American song than a hill song. I have not made up the words yet, though. I do not know whether the words should be in American or Greek. Maybe you can help me with the words.'

Gus played the song which was very much like a combination of 'Don't Fence Me In' and 'I'm an Old Cow Hand.' Strictly a western song, which made Nick and Yvonne laugh, and laugh at themselves for being taken in by Gus's joke. It was not a bad song, however. And Nick said maybe he would help him with the words.

Then Nick said they had to be going, but that they would be back on Monday in the late afternoon to eat of the dandelions and lamb, and not to tell Old Pete about the meal or he would probably want to come along.

They left and went out to Los Caballeros, which was almost as crowded as when Nick was there two nights before. Raul was there with a redhead he introduced as Speedy Weedy. And Tuttle was there with his bride-to-be. And Ellen the Fair was there with a cadet from the naval base at Glenview. They were all at the bar and couldn't get over how Yvonne had grown, and were all feeling pretty good and expecting Fred Mosely, another friend of theirs. Fred had lost his right leg D-day at Normandy, Raul told Nick, and was still being patched up out at the Veterans Hospital in Oak Park.

Raul gave Yvonne his seat and Nick stood beside her and ordered and went to the phone booth and called Nora again, but she wasn't in. When Nick came back they were all laughing at a story Yvonne had told, and she was telling another one about how does the little male mouse make love to the little female mouse.

Raul said he didn't know. How?

And Yvonne said, 'With his iddle mouse organ,' in baby talk, which caused considerable more laughter, and though Nick laughed, he was really considerably shocked that his own sister was so grown up as to be sitting at a bar telling stories like that.

They were all drinking with a happy defiance and vengeance, as if everything in the world that had to be done was done and nothing was left for them to do except drink

with a happy defiance and vengeance (it was better than drinking with an unhappy defiance and vengeance, anyhow - if that was any consolation). Louie the bartender was himself getting pretty drunk, and pouring a little extra and buying rounds.

Nick went and tried to call Nora again before he had even finished his second drink. She still wasn't in. And when he got back to the bar he started to talk to Ellen a little. And after a while he thought he was getting some place, and he kind of pushed Yvonne off on Ellen's naval cadet, which seemed fine with Yvonne. Then Nick went back to try to call Nora once more, finally, and as he passed the stained glass window where the bushes were, he saw Old Pete peering in the window. Nick played like he hadn't seen him and when he got in the phone booth, started to laugh, and when he got back he told Yvonne.

She got the giggles and sneaked a quick look at Old Pete, but played like she hadn't seen him, too. Then Nick told everyone that Old Pete was out in the bushes and they decided they would all turn around at once and look at him, which they did, and they could see he was embarrassed about being caught spying on his children, and he disappeared. They all had a good laugh. Yvonne especially.

Fred Mosely came in on his crutches. He had a nurse with him. He was a tall dark boy who was almost too good looking. Yvonne had had several crushes on him when he used to come to their house to visit Nick before the war. He seemed very bitter about the leg and didn't laugh at all, and you could tell the nurse was in love with him. He was very sarcastic, almost rough with her, but she didn't seem to mind at all.

Ellen got the conversation around to marriage, which didn't bother Nick at all. He didn't have any scruples about leading her on, leading her to think that he was available, in order to get into her pants. He knew her well enough to know that after you hadn't seen her for a while, or rather been out with her for a while, you had to practically start all over. Anyhow, it was a challenge, Nick knew, and an enjoyable one. And for a change he didn't care too much how he made out. He was feeling pretty good from the drinks, and there was always Nora, if he

really had to have it. He could go there. So the chances where, he analyzed happily, that as long as he really didn't care he would more than likely make out. The thing was how to get rid of the naval cadet. It was quite obvious what the cadet had on *his* mind. Well, he would figure that out later.

They drank and talked about the days before the war, and as if by mutual consent, exaggerated all the things they had done. Then they talked about the war and naturally, with all the women around, exaggerated their experiences, exaggerated them so profoundly, with such honest faces, that they not only began to believe each other, but to believe themselves, never suspecting that they had silently formed a kind of conspiracy, actually the very same kind of conspiracy that they suspected women of always having.

By the time Marci and Pierro came in, which was a little after midnight, everyone, including Yvonne, was feeling good. Earlier Tuttle and his bride-to-be had had a slight argument over the ranch Tuttle was someday going to buy in Arizona and she had gone into the ladies' room and cried. Of course Ellen and Yvonne and Speedy had gone in to console her, and when they all came out they looked loathingly at Tuttle until finally even the fellows were forced to look at him as if he were some superior brand of a shit. They didn't want to condemn Tuttle, of course. But there was little else they could do. They were American enough, even if they had been out of the country for several years, to know that when the women lined up on one side as they did in this circumstance, you either gave in and gave up or wrote off the niceties you had extended and the money you had spent on them as a total loss, at least until that time when you could separate them. Then, Nick knew, you would have to start all over extending niceties and spending money.

Pierro, Nick could tell, was feeling rather uncomfortable, but Marci seemed to be enjoying herself. Nick told the group how Marci had sung in musical comedy, and they talked her into singing. The organist played and she sang 'Stairway to the Stars' and 'I'll Never Smile Again' and everyone in the place cheered. They stomped and hollered that they wanted to hear more, but Pierro, obviously

pleased but trying not to look pleased, politely refused for her as if it were a duty of his he had been performing for years.

Then Nick, who was really feeling very good, giggly good, asked Marci to dance. He had only danced twice before in his life (not including the Greek dances he did so well) and had been drunk both times. Of course Ellen did not like the idea of Nick asking Marci to dance, especially since she had asked Nick earlier in the evening to dance and he had refused. But the main reason he had asked Marci to dance was because he knew Ellen wouldn't like it - and he was going to play his hand out to the hilt with Ellen, he decided after he had put his hand on her firm little buttocks while Marci was singing, and Ellen had turned almost ragingly, insulted, degraded, and humiliated, around and cracked the sneaky hand hard. The sting on his hand was minor compared to the major incision made on his vanity, especially after the careful calculations he had made. He had managed, however, to give her his best dumbfounded look, as if the hand that had pulled the sneaky trick was not really a part of the real true Nick Stratton, had looked so innocently dumbfounded and shocked at the renegade hand that had he looked at it any longer, he would more than likely have convinced himself that indeed the hand had acted of its own accord.

So he danced with Marci and told her how well she sang and apologized for the way he danced and found himself telling her, truthfully, that the reason he had never danced was because he was selfconscious, afraid. She danced very well and probably made it look like he knew what he was doing, he thought. He felt very good for having told her about being afraid to dance; very truthful, very honest, really very pleased with himself. He had lied so much to Ellen this night that it was a real relief telling the truth, a real relief really getting away from Ellen because he couldn't remember the lies that he had told her in the beginning and he had begun to get entangled in them. Marci danced very close, very easy with him, and hummed a little of 'I'll See You Again' and Nick could feel her breath as it passed his ear warmly, and he thought he would call Nora again when this dance set was over.

He told Marci a couple of humorous stories about the army. One about the time in China when he had bet his best friend fifty dollars he couldn't eat with chopsticks, and lost when the friend took out his pocket knife and sharpened the sticks to a point and used the two pointed sticks like a fork.

He seemed entirely different from the way he had at his home, Marci thought. He was really very pleasant. And there was none of that lazy loafing insolence about him that she had noticed earlier. Of course she realized he was a little tight, which kind of aroused her curiosity, as she would have expected him to act differently tight. She had visualized him, or would have visualized him, she thought now, dancing, as being wild and fiendishly mean and uncontrollable when he was drunk. She certainly never expected this kind of gentleness and inner sweetness and honesty and veritable gaiety that he was now displaying. In fact, she concluded, there was not only something sweet about him, but rather sad, too, she thought sympathetically.

Which was her mistake. Because at once Nick caught the sudden twinge of sorrow that her eyes showed for him. And as if she had tripped the wire of a booby trap, he exploded with a rash of subtle lies that she couldn't quite detect as being lies, as they were actually unpremeditated little lies that even he did not know he was telling, and had unpremeditatedly and unintentionally told before, and seemed to always tell in order to gain that one thing that he had never seemed to be able to get enough of - Love. Love - the one thing that every other human being had, but that he had always somehow been cheated out of and that by God he was going to get his share of if he had to sell his body or soul or die in the process, he was going to get his share along with a little extra and save up that little extra by God, just like Old Pete saved up money for that rainy day of - Love.

She did not know what it was, but she felt the change in him and tightened up slightly and he felt that and just as the dance ended, whispered laughingly into her ear, 'I saw you swipe that handkerchief.' And then laughed roarily and wildly and almost fiendishly as she had originally

presumed he would laugh when he was drunk; but what perplexed her was that intermingled in that laugh was a sweetness of soul, an understanding of what she had done that was not accusative. Nevertheless she felt the redness wing through her; her cheeks got hot and pink from the embarrassment of being caught. She had never been caught before.

He led her back to the bar, still laughing. And she said, 'Goddamn you, Nick,' and laughed with him. It was the only thing that she could do that gave her any sense of relief. Back at the bar she had taken Pierro's arm and stood close to him as if seeking refuge, and later glanced down at Nick as he talked to Ellen, wondering if he would dare tell anyone, knowing that he was uncontrollable and wild and hopeless as anyone she had ever met - and she told Pierro she thought Nick was wild and hopeless and drank too much and was a vicious liar when he drank.

Then she and Pierro finished their drinks and they left. Nick got very drunk and wanted to drive Ellen home, but even Louie the bartender said Nick was too drunk to drive and Nick was very pleasant and happy and agreed that he was too drunk to drive. Louie wanted to call him a cab, but Nick said he was too drunk to drive a cab, too. Nick said that the only one that was going to drive him home was Louie, his friend. So they all stayed there drinking with that same happy defiance and vengeance until Louie closed the bar and drove Nick and Yvonne home and let them off and took the car to Sam's garage and left it. Nick fell down in the yard by the porch steps. Sitting on the ground he began to sing, 'Gentleman rankers out on a spree -', and Yvonne tried to lift him and quiet him but he was too heavy and too impossibly happy and she found herself laughing at the silliness of her predicament. Finally he made it to the porch steps and began to crawl up them. Then he heard the porch door open and he heard Old Pete say:

'Keep it up, my son, and some day you will be president of a fruit stand.' Then: 'Yvonne, come in here.' The last thing he heard was Yvonne giggle. Then later, still dark out, he woke up on the steps and went upstairs to bed.

Chapter Fifteen

MARY woke Nick a little after seven. Old Pete was waiting for him down in the kitchen, she said. He was not feeling well, as he had been up most of the night, worried about Yvonne. Nick shouldn't say anything that would upset him. Mary said Pete was very cross earlier but she had calmed him down some. And how late was it when Nick and Yvonne had gotten in? She was very tired from the excitement of yesterday and had taken a sedative and had not awakened at all.

Nick took a cold shower. He felt amazingly good considering yesterday - and last night especially. He put on slippers, khaki pants, and a tee shirt and went down and joined Old Pete in the breakfast nook. Old Pete had out pencil and paper and was figuring, and Nick sat down across from him.

'Well,' Old Pete said. 'I'm not going to say anything about last night. People do crazy things when they're young. I was young once myself. But you ought to have more respect for your sister.'

'Yvonne didn't do anything wrong,' Nick said. 'You make her want to do something wrong, though. Spying on her.'

'Spying,' Pete half-hollered indignantly. 'Protecting my own daughter, you mean. If you'd protect your sister, if your mother and I could count on you to do that, I wouldn't stay up half the night worrying. What's wrong with you, son?'

'My God, Dad,' Nick said. 'I've only been home a day and you're on me.'

Old Pete reached over and picked up his pillbox. 'Mary,' he said, 'have the maid bring me some water. I don't feel so good.'

And he really didn't look too good, Nick thought. Not at all. He was pale and his hands shook when he

picked up the pillbox and he seemed to be breathing heavily. Old Pete took the pills.

'I guess I was a little excited,' Nick said. 'Coming home and all.'

'I suppose,' Old Pete said tiredly.

'I mean seeing all my old friends.'

'You shouldn't take your sister to places like that, though, son,' he said tiredly. 'I mean, you're a man. It's different with you.'

'I'll take her some place nice,' Nick said. 'Maybe the Edgewater.'

'That's a good boy,' Old Pete said. 'You wanna come down to the office. Maybe I show you a few things about our affairs.'

'Not today. All right, Dad?' Nick said. 'I think I'll go to the beach today.'

'Yeah,' Old Pete said. 'Get sun. I wish I had the time - I'd get some sun myself,' he said. 'God knows I need it.'

'You don't look so good,' Nick said.

'I can't take it like I use to. And the business is tougher than ever. I got to watch out for myself, Nick. I've got no one. No one. And my partners - they're brothers. They're blood. Not that I don't trust them. But you can't beat blood. That's why I was counting on you, son. If I wasn't old, and sick, I wouldn't care so much. But who's going to look out for our well being after I'm gone. Who's gonna take care of your mother. And Yvonne. That's what I was counting on you so much for, son,' Old Pete said, his eyes misting.

'Take it easy, Dad,' Nick said, putting his hand over his father's and patting it. 'Take it easy. Maybe we can work out something so everybody will be happy.'

'I need you,' the old man started to cry, then got up from the table crying and left.

He was so pathetic sometimes, Nick thought. So terribly ignorant and helpless and pathetic.

'I'll go in and talk to him,' Mary said to Nick. 'You stay here and have some eggs and bacon. I'll calm him down.'

'All right, Mother,' Nick said. 'I think he's just a little tired. He always gets extra emotional when he's tired.'

'He's really not too well, Nick,' Mary said.

'He isn't?' Nick said, genuinely surprised.

'Not like he used to be.'

'I didn't know that,' Nick said. 'Really sick,' he said incredulously as if thinking out loud.

'I never wrote you,' Mary said. 'But I talked to his doctor myself. He said your father definitely has to take it easier.'

'His heart?'

'His arteries, too,' Mary said. 'They harden as you age. You know that, Nick. I'll go now. I'll calm him.'

The maid brought bacon and eggs and he began to eat and read the paper. He had only taken two bites of the scrambled eggs when he read right on Page One near the bottom in bold type:

**THEATRE UNION HEAD IN PERU, INDIANA,
HOUSE BLOWN UP BY HOMEMADE BOMB;
SCHOOL CHILD CRITICALLY INJURED**

Peru, Indiana, - this small, quiet town was electrified today when a homemade bomb was detonated in front of the home of J. Raker, head of Local 404 of the Motion Picture Projector Operators' Union. He, his wife, and two small children, Karen, 7, and Arthur, 8, were not at home. But Beverly Small, a nine-year-old school girl in the fifth grade of Peru Elementary School, was critically injured by flying glass. She was rushed to emergency surgery at Peru Hospital, where her condition was listed as critical. No other details were given by hospital authorities.

Chief of Police Arnold Robinson and Fire Chief Ben Stoll released a joint statement which implied the bomb was probably planted in front of Raker's home because of disputes between the Motion Picture Theatre Operators and Union Local 404. They said they would question executives of Interstate Theatres, a chain operating in that Indiana area, to determine any possible connection.

Oh my God,' Nick said to himself. Not a little kid - I won-

der if Old Pete's seen this. I wonder if he was - oh God, no. He couldn't have - Nick got up and went into the living-room, carrying the paper. Old Pete was sitting on the couch and Mary was sitting next to him reading the horoscope magazine and patting his hand. Old Pete looked up at Nick.

'Have you seen the paper?' Nick asked.

'Not yet, son,' Old Pete said.

'Look at this,' Nick said.

Old Pete took the paper and Nick pointed to the column and Old Pete read. Over the top of the paper Nick could see his face, which was slightly flushed from his last emotional spasm, growing slowly pale and white again. 'Oh my God,' Old Pete said finally, weakly. 'I swear to God, son, I don't know anything about this. I swear it,' he said, shocked and bewildered. 'Mary, this is terrible. Oh my God, to think that anyone could think I had anything to do with this.' He was very pale and shocked. And bewildered.

'I'll get you some brandy,' Mary said hurrying off.

Nick stood there looking down at him as he read the article over. Then over again, still white and bewildered and shocked. Then Mary came with the brandy and he drank it all down in one gulp.

'I know what they're doing. I told the Stratos to watch out for those union guys. The union people did that. That's the way they work. They're tough, they are. They wanted to get rid of that fellow and put the blame on us all at the same time. Smart guys. That's the way they work - I'd better call Stratos. We gotta make a statement. Right away.'

Old Pete suddenly wasn't sick any more. But instead, Nick saw, fighting mad. And obviously shocked by the entire affair. And wasn't going to be blamed for anything he didn't do. And was going to protect, the hell with his heart, what he had worked to build up.

He called both the Stratos. Then called the corporation lawyer. And asked Nick to drive him to the train station. It hadn't taken him fifteen minutes to make the three calls, put on his coat, kiss Mary goodbye, and get into the car.

In the car on the way to the station he did not seem to

know that Nick existed. He sat there doggedly, determinedly, his fists clenched tightly, halfswearing and halfmuttering to himself. And just before he got out of the car, slapped Nick a hard friendly slap on the back: 'Take it easy, kid. I see you tonight.' And got out of the car and walked doggedly, determinedly away.

Nick watched him walking away, head bowed, and thought how you had to admire him. If Old Pete had asked him to go to the office, Nick certainly wouldn't have refused now. But now, with the fight ahead of him, he didn't seem to need Nick or anyone. You certainly did have to admire the old bastard. He asked no quarter. And gave none. And played the game the only way he knew how, as hard as he knew how. In spite of all his faults there were times when you just had to admire him. Sixty-three years old. And up all night. And sick. And suddenly a fight, and he didn't need anyone. Not you. Or Mary. Or anyone.

Well, Nick thought, he couldn't go on like that without killing himself. And soon. He was in no condition to get that riled up. The fact of the matter was that he really did need someone. His partners *were* younger than he, and like Pete said, *were* blood. He had them to contend with. And he had his normal family responsibilities. Plus all the outside responsibilities that he had taken on: like Pierro and his mother; the Church; all his relatives back in Verdamah. The real trouble was that he really did need help and really, down deep, didn't believe that he needed it. And if he didn't have some real help soon, he would sure as hell kill himself going at the pace he was.

He had driven right past their house and down to the Lake, driving along aimlessly, thinking. Well, I'd better have a talk with Mary when I get home. They'd have to do something right away to slow Old Pete down. Whether Old Pete liked it or not. Goddamn it, it was Nick's duty to see that Old Pete took care of himself. After all, who did Old Pete have besides his family? And if, within the framework of your own family, you didn't look out for each other, who would? Goddamn it, it was about time he grew up and showed at least a little responsibility as far as his family was concerned.

Then he swung the car around and drove home. He went upstairs and shaved and unpacked his things and came downstairs and had several cups of coffee with Mary and talked to her about Old Pete. After they had talked a while he told Mary he thought he'd give the office a ring and find out how Old Pete was making out. He called and Miss Keith, Old Pete's secretary, said Pete was in conference and then Miss Keith talked to Nick for a while, asking him all about where he had been and what he had done, it would be so nice to see him again. He said he would be down Monday with his father. He would see her then - he wanted to ask her a few things about Old Pete and how he was feeling. Then a little later Old Pete returned Nick's call.

'What can I do for you, son?' Old Pete asked authoritatively.

'I just wanted to know how you were making out.'

'I'll make out,' Old Pete said. 'Don't worry.'

'Well,' Nick said, 'I thought I might be able to help. Or something. As long as I'm in town for a while with nothing to do.'

'Get some sun, son. Take your sister to the beach. Your mother, too, if she'll go. I'll take care of things here,' he said in a firm, sure voice.

'I'll ask Mother,' Nick said. 'And don't worry about Yvonne, Dad.'

'Thanks, kid,' Old Pete said. 'See you tonight, kid. Have a nice day. Take the radio to the beach - you can hear the Cubs at two.'

Old Pete put the phone down and sat there tapping one clenched fist on the desk, a satisfied smile on his face. It had been some morning. The Stratos brothers had arrived at the office a little before Old Pete. Charlie Stratos had already talked to his cousin Alex, the fixer, in Peru. Alex had told Charlie they didn't have to worry one bit - the roustabout who had made and set off the bomb was half-way to Florida by now and besides, just between them, there was no love lost between the Police Chief and Raker, the union man. Too, Alex had said, he had the chief in his hip pocket because the chief had invested some money with him in a property over in Marion, Indiana, that they

had bought cheap at a sheriff's auction by buying the sheriff. Already, Alex had told Charlie, he had had a talk with the Chief and was going to get the Fire Chief and they were going to release another statement to the press stating that they now believed the trouble was caused because of dissension within the union itself.

Of course Charlie Stratos hadn't told any of this to his brother or Old Pete, but assured them that there would be no trouble, that they weren't involved, but Old Pete wanted to be reassured.

'For Christ's sake, Charlie,' Old Pete had said, 'this ain't the Twenties. You can't go around hurting innocent people.'

'That was none of our affair. I talked to Alex already. He didn't have anything like that in mind. Somebody beat us to him, that's all. Alex would never do anything like that.'

'I don't like this,' George Stratos had said. 'I don't like it one goddamn bit.'

'I tell you this was none of our business,' Charlie said.

'I don't think Alex would go that far myself,' Old Pete said to George, the younger.

'I tell you,' Charlie said, wiping his glasses. Then with the same old crumpled handkerchief wiped his pock-marked face, 'I tell you that was none of our business. Now don't worry about it.'

'I don't think Alex would do anything like that,' Old Pete repeated.

'Well, he wouldn't,' Charlie said. 'I talked to him and he said we didn't have a thing to do with it. Not to worry. Somebody put it on Raker for us. We were lucky. Now if we can just let the public know the facts. That it was the union people that hurt the kid.'

'Maybe we ought to hire us a public relations man. To go over there and protect our interest. I don't like the idea of having our business hurt because some guy goes crazy and starts blowing up things,' Old Pete said. 'We worked too hard to build up this business to have some tough guys step in and hurt our business - Jesus I thought this was a respectable business.'

'A public relations guy might be a good idea,' Charlie

said. 'We ought to talk to the lawyer about that when he gets here.'

'Yeah,' Old Pete said. 'Maybe we ought to send George down there for a couple of days. So it don't look like we were avoiding it - and we ought to sue that goddam newspaper for hurting our reputation. I'd go down there myself, but Nick's home. I can't leave the minute my kid comes home.'

'Go to -' George started.

'That might be a good idea to have George go over,' Charlie, the Elder, said. 'I can't get away. We talk to the lawyer. Nick's home, eh?'

'Yesterday,' Old Pete said. 'He's coming down Monday. I'd have brought him today. But you know. He wants to visit with his mother. He's grown up, that kid.'

'I like that kid,' George, the younger, said.

'You're his favourite,' Old Pete said to George.

'Maybe we all have lunch,' Charlie said, wiping his eyes again.

'We wait for the lawyer now, okay Pete?' Charlie said. 'We meet back here in the conference room when the lawyer comes in.'

'Okay,' Old Pete said. 'I think we oughta sue that sonofabitching newspaper though,' Old Pete said. 'We're liable to take a hell of a beating in our business down there. And we worked too hard building up this business to have a bunch of hoods hurt it.'

And he had turned and left. Then Pete had gone into his office and on his private phone had called Lawrence Green, the banker.

'Lawrence,' Old Pete had said, 'you see the paper?'

'What's it all about?' Green spoke calmly.

'I wish like hell I knew. Charlie says that it's none of our affair. The union did it. That Raker had some trouble inside the union. But I don't like it,' Old Pete said. 'I worked too hard, Lawrence, to have a bunch of bums ruin my reputation. My business. I don't like it,' Old Pete said indignantly. 'That Charlie makes me afraid sometimes. I don't think *he* had anything to do with it. I pray to God he didn't. But I don't like the explanation I got so far. I think we ought to have lunch next week.'

'All right, Pete.'

'Nick's home, Lawrence. My son's home,' Old Pete said suddenly, dramatically.

'Wonderful, Pete. Can you bring Nick?'

'I bring them both, maybe. Nick and Pierro. Then maybe after lunch we can take a little walk and have a talk. I'll know some more by then. God, Lawrence, this has upset me. Innocent people hurt. And they're trying to make it look like we, Interstate, are behind it. It's terrible, Lawrence,' he said. 'Terrible.'

'Take it easy, Pete. If you didn't have anything to do with it, and I'm sure you didn't, you don't have anything to worry about.'

'Well, it makes me feel terrible, I tell you. I'm not as young as I used to be. And my son, my son, God I wouldn't want him to think - you know how I love that kid, Lawrence.'

Then after a few more words Old Pete had hung up. Then after that he had called home and talked to Mary and Nick, and now he was sitting behind the desk with that satisfied smile on his face. He took out a ten cent cigar and began to unpeel the wrapper. Then suddenly he put the cigar down and picked up the interoffice phone and called Charlie Stratos.

'After we have the meeting with the lawyer,' Old Pete said, 'I'd like to have a little talk with you and George. All right?'

'Sure,' Charlie said. 'About anything in particular?'

'About Nick,' Old Pete said. 'You know how we talked about bringing Nick into the business. He needs a little rest first. But he ought to be ready to go to work soon. He went through hell over there, Charlie. Hell, I tell you. He looks ten years older than he ought to look, I tell you. It's terrible what those kids went through.'

'Sure, Pete, You know how I like that boy.'

'Well, I think we oughta have a little talk. You know? About where we're going to put him and all. I want you fellows to be satisfied, you know that. And I don't want no favours because he's my son. But he's a stockholder, too. And he'll take a real interest in the business, being a stockholder and all. Green thinks it's wonderful we're taking

Nick in. He suggested maybe we put him in bookkeeping. To watch the figures. You know, Charlie, we haven't got anybody of our own, anyone we can really trust in bookkeeping. Green said that would give him a good basis for the financial end,' Old Pete said. 'In fact, we're having lunch with Green next week,' Old Pete said. 'Green likes the kid almost like a father, Charlie. He's really crazy about that kid.'

He hung up the interoffice phone, picked up his private phone and called Lou Duck.

He told Lou that Nick was home, and discussed the article in the morning paper and told Lou there was nothing to it. Then asked Lou if maybe he wouldn't like to go out and see the Cubs with him that afternoon, which Lou not only agreed to do, but which firmly convinced the restaurateur that Interstate and Old Pete didn't have anything to do with the Peru business, as Lou Duck had so firmly believed when he had read the morning paper.

Of course this was the main reason for Old Pete's inviting Lou to the game. No one would ever expect Old Pete to be at the game the very day that something like this had come up if he *did* have something to do with it. And every Greek in Chicago, at least important Greek, and every important Chicago newspaperman came into Lou's place some time during the week for lunch or dinner or a drink. Naturally, Pete knew, this Peru business would be much the topic of conversation during the next week. And more than likely everybody would be inclined to snicker and say Sure, Old Pete and the Stratos boys did it. But Lou Duck, Pete analyzed, being braggart that he was, gossip that he was, would like nothing better than to appear to be in the real know about the Peru business. And Old Pete could hear Lou saying, 'You're all crazy. Why Old Pete called me that morning, calm as a baby lamb, and we went out to see the Cubs and had some laughs. Pete didn't have anything to do with it. And if he did, I'd be the first to know about it. Everybody knows how close me and Pete are.'

Pete, his elbows on the arms of his chair, sat there and half laughed to himself, then suddenly he began to think of last night at the table and Marci - Marci - and then it struck him.

Marci's grandfather had been one of the biggest men in Chicago in the days when Old Pete first started The Mill. In fact, if Pete remembered correctly, his engineering firm was still intact, still big. He wondered if the family still held any of the stock. She might make a hell of a wife for Pierro. With the family connections in the engineering and architectural fields, and Pierro's natural ability, Pierro could go a long way being married to her. Too, he would settle down. Which was what he *really* needed - to get married and settle down. Instead of acting like a crazy god-damn artist. Running off to that place in Michigan. Going to Europe. Designing cities. Who the hell did he think he was. He hadn't designed a bathroom for any pay. And he wants to design cities. What the hell kind of family I got. Why the hell don't they come down to earth, he wondered. Designing cities. Jesus - he was forced to laugh. What do these kids think the world is made of these days - Suckers? Cities - and he ain't even designed a bathroom.

He picked up a telephone and called Lawrence Stokes. Stokes was Lawrence Green's credit man at the bank.

'Larry,' he said, 'I need a piece of information on some people. Remember the Prestons. The engineering family.'

'Certainly, Pete. But the old man's dead.'

'Yeah, but his son and granddaughter live out in Evanston. Can you get me a run-down on their net worth? Their income? What kind of holdings they got? It's a personal matter for a friend.'

'It'll take a while, Pete.'

'How long?'

'Depends. Maybe they've got some of it covered some way. I should be able to get it within a couple of weeks.'

'I'd appreciate that,' Old Pete said. 'By the way, you got an interest in a transportation company, don't you? I think you told me you did.'

'A bus line outside of Milwaukee.'

'Well, there's a line runs through Marion, Indiana. They're having a little trouble, I hear. Not a big company, but fair size. I think it's up - I thought you might like to know.'

'Thanks very much, Pete. I'll look into it.'

'Glad to be of help,' Old Pete said. 'Maybe we go out to a game some day.'

'You still have the same box, don't you?'

'For thirty-five years. Ever since they moved the park out there.'

'I'd like to, Pete.'

'Fine, kid,' Old Pete said to Lawrence Stokes, who was fifty-two years old.

That would be a hell of a match. A Stratton to a Preston. That would make those Greeks sit up and take notice. They wouldn't think Pierro was a faggot, a snob any more if he married a Preston. That was one of the oldest, most respected names in the city. That would really be something. And he could settle down and practice right here. I'd better have a talk with that kid. And with Nick. What the hell is that girl going to think of our family if Nick acts like he did at the table last night. That goddamn Nick, he's got about as much brains as a jackass, sometimes. And as stubborn. Now if Pierro is going to take this girl out, he's going to have to do it right. He's going to have to spend a few dollars. Well, what the hell, that's a good investment. What a wedding I'd give them. What a helluva wedding! It'd be the talk of the town, I tell you. A perfect match. A Stratton and a Preston. He'd better call Mary later. He'd have no trouble with Mary in this matter.

This is going to have to take some careful planning. You can't afford to make Pierro suspicious of what you're up to, though if you did ever put it over, Pierro ought to be so grateful to you that he'd kiss your ass on State and Madison. But he'd probably never realize all the good I done for him. At least he'd never give me any credit. No matter what I had to do with it. Well, the hell with the credit.

I wonder how I can work this. Get it started. If I could only get Pierro to bring her to Sophia's wedding. That would be a real place to start. I could spread the word she'd be there with Pierro, and then those Greeks would come around and give Pierro some respect. If he had her with him, and they knew who she was, you're damn right they'd show him some respect. And I don't give a damn how he'd react openly, Pierro would like it. You're damn right he would.

I got to have a talk with Mary about this wedding. It's gotta be right. Real class right. Maybe I can get hold of Jim over at the Ambassador to help Mary see that it's done absolutely right. Not gaudy. But right. Jim would do it. After all, I gave Jim his start in this business. Christ, it's hard to believe he'd ever become a headwaiter at the Ambassador. Why he was one of the worst bus boys The Mill ever had. Well, you can never tell, can you?

Another thing, Mary and I better go over that list. Maybe I can get the mayor to come. I give him a lot of votes, and the party a lot of money. It's good I give to the Democrats this time and the Stratos to the Republicans. Two years ago it was the other way around. I'll have to tell the Stratos that I'm gonna stay with the Democrats once more this time. They won't mind. They had them twice in a row while I had the Republicans.

But Mary and I got to sit down and have a long talk, he thought. Pierro would listen to Mary on a matter like this. You know, I ought to send Mary some flowers. It's been a helluva long time since I sent her any flowers. Or took her any place. Well, this has been a busy year. Especially for an old man. But dammit, she's been a good wife. She hasn't complained a bit because you've been so busy this year. Not one bit. Flowers? You're damn right, flowers. And maybe something else too. A nice bracelet for the wedding. No, not for the wedding. A bracelet because I been neglecting her because of my work. And because few men got a wife that wouldn't complain about all the time his work took. And maybe give her a few extra dollars. That's what Mary would really like - the cash. She'd really like the cash. And she ought to have some now. While she can enjoy it. You're damn right she should.

He went back over to his desk and sat down and called Miss Keith on the intercom and told her to send Mary flowers with a card from him, 'I love you, Dolly - Pete'. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out his key ring, opened the bottom drawer of his desk, pulled out his steel strongbox, and after momentarily searching the ring again, unlocked the box.

Then he remembered Nick saying something the night before about his Army insurance. Old Pete wondered how

much it was for, and who the beneficiary was. Well, he'd better talk to Nick about that. What the hell did he know about insurance. He'd get his insurance man in to talk to Nick; to make sure that he had the right beneficiary.

Then suddenly he thought, I wonder if he's got a will. He certainly ought to have a will. God, what would happen if he had a will I didn't know about and something happened to him. God knows who his stock would go to. Did I hear somewhere that in the army they made you make out a will. Jesus, I'd better talk to the lawyer about that today. That would be a terrible thing if he had a will and it was made out to some outsider.

You know who I didn't invite to the wedding, he thought suddenly, still staring at the contents of the strongbox. Old John Rakis from Atlanta. Now there would be somebody for Nick - Rakis's daughter. He had about as much money as any Greek in America and no wife, no one except his daughter. And she was about the most beautiful Greek girl Old Pete had ever seen. Having Nick take her to the wedding would really make old Charlie Stratos anxious for his daughter to get Nick. Why Rakis owned more theatre properties in the South than any individual. The leases on one group of theatres alone brought him over a hundred and thirty-five thousand a year clear. Wouldn't that be something. To have Pierro with Marci Preston. And Nick with Pat Rakis. What would the Greeks think about that?

Chapter Sixteen

YVONNE slept late. Nick went to the beach alone and told Mary to have Yvonne meet him there. On the large beach towel he dozed for a while in the warm midmorning sun, then got up and took a long swim in the cool water. There were few people on the beach, or up the beach, and he decided to take a walk. Walking, feeling the warm sun on his body, feeling his muscles taut and firm from the long

swim, feeling the pleasant soft wet give of his bare feet in the sand, he told himself that for now the holiday was over. He was not going to the races today, he decided. Maybe tomorrow he would go to the cocktail party Raul's father was giving. That was if he could get in touch with Nora.

The sun was up high now, high in its arc and warm, and he was walking fast and sweating freely, and when he had walked back almost a mile from where his beach towel was, he decided to swim it.

Yvonne was there by his towel when he came out of the water.

'Did I ever catch hell,' she said.

'What did you say to him?' Nick said.

'Nothing,' she said.

'Nothing?' Nick questioned, sitting down.

'Of course not, Nick. That's the only way to handle Dad. Just stand there like his every word was the gospel, was a part of the greatest sermon you ever heard, and don't say a word. After a while he's not mad at you any more. It's very simple. I mean he begins to think that you can't be really very bad, you certainly must have some intelligence to appreciate so thoroughly what he has just told you. Then you just go about your business,' she said. Then giggled. 'What it gets down to, I guess, is that after a while he begins to feel (because you haven't said anything) either very great and very important or that he's talking to himself. Either way, he stops much sooner than if you open your mouth. Like you do - Where have you been?'

'Up the beach. Talking to myself.'

'You'd better slow down, Nick. You can't do it all in one day.'

'That's what I've been thinking.'

'You do believe in God, don't you?'

'I thought about that, too. I think every man does, in his way. I certainly believe Christ was some man. When you think about Him it can really make you hurt. It really wakes you up, makes you see how little courage you really have.'

'You have courage, Nick. You proved that in the war.'

'Not that kind. Courage as we know it was a façade you

lived behind and died behind. I'm not talking about the kind of courage you have in a war, or in a football game, or in a baseball game. Or the kind that Hemingway writes about. The funny thing is that Hemingway doesn't really write about courage the way a lot of people that debunk him think that he does. He writes about a way of life. I think he's more admired for his own way of life than for his writing. I mean he goes his own way. Like Old Pete goes his. That's why Old Pete's admired. That's what you have to admire about Pierro, snob that he is. At least he's establishing a way of life.'

'Yes, but Hemingway said bullfighters were the only ones that lived life to the hilt,' Yvonne said. 'I remember that distinctly. Certainly he was talking about courage then, wasn't he?'

'Not the courage of a man in the ring with the bull. No, ~~what~~ he meant, at least what I think he meant, was the courage it took to separate yourself from society, to give up what you had to give up in order to be capable, or should I say properly trained, in order to be able to face that death. Like Christ. The courage to live alone.

'That's my idea of courage. I think it is the true courage. I think that is why we admire personal courage so in war, in sports, in anything here in America. We speak of that courage, place it up on such a pedestal so we can avoid the real one. It's a vast, secret conspiracy on the part of the world. And it is with us (this conspiracy) so ingrained in us that we don't realize we have conspired. Certainly, I don't think it's a premeditated conspiracy.'

'You've always suffered a lot that way, haven't you, Nick?'

'Every man makes his own suffering. Let's say I'm a little more apt to take pity on myself than most men. I'm a little more sensitive. And emotional. It's in the Greek blood, I think,' Nick smiled warmly. 'Hemingway, in saying what he said about bullfighters, said much the same thing as Christ said in Mark. It was when the man came to Jesus and said, 'Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?' And Jesus said - this I remember exactly - He said, 'One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure

in heaven: and come take up the cross and follow me.'

'I think what Jesus meant was sell whatsoever thou must instead of hast. We interpret it as meaning to sell or give up all material possessions. I don't think He meant that. I think He meant that the man must give up whatever was necessary in order to be pure of heart. And when He said give to the poor, I don't think He meant the materially poor. I think He meant the poor of heart. But that man, like us, took it in the material sense. 'For he went away grieved, because he had great possessions.' There were many, probably, that would have made great bullfighters but didn't because they couldn't give up what was necessary to give up.'

'I love you when you talk like this, Nick. I hate so to see you destroy yourself. As you seem sometimes to want to destroy yourself.' She put her hand on his.

'I don't think I'm going to stay in the Army, baby.'

'I didn't think you were either,' she smiled. 'Remember how we used to read poetry in front of the fireplace.'

'I remember.'

'Nick, have you ever been to bed with Ellen?'

He grinned. 'That's a hell of a question to ask. But I guess it's all right to tell you. Yes, I have.'

'She's good, isn't she? - I mean in bed.'

'How did you figure that out?'

'I saw her with you last night. I don't know what it was, but that's the way it struck me. She's on the beach. I stopped and said hello to her when I was looking for your towel - she's a bitch if I ever saw one. A real rich bitch.'

'Are you?' Nick asked her, smiling.

'No. But don't think I don't want to be sometimes.'

'You a virgin?'

'Yes. But almost not. I came real close once.'

'That cadet?'

'My cadet,' she smiled. 'God, I want a man to love. And to love me.'

'We all want that,' he said. 'It's not easy. I think it's really about the hardest thing there is. I mean you have to give up things, in much the same way that we discussed a while ago.'

'I *want* to give up things for my man.'

She smiled to herself.

'Where's Ellen at?' he asked.

She pointed. 'She said she wasn't staying long. She was going to the races. And you were going too.'

'I'm not going.'

'Good,' she said. 'Please take it easy for a while, Nick. I've never seen you so wound up as yesterday.'

'It was a big day.'

'You'll find what you want. I know you will. If you'll only be patient. Please try and be patient.'

'Okay, baby,' he said and patted her.

'Who are you going to the wedding with?'

'I thought I'd ask Nora. But I'll take you, too.'

'You will,' she smiled.

'You'll have a good time. You've never seen Old Pete at a big wedding, have you?'

'No.'

'Well, he gets drunk. Real drunk. You won't have any trouble with him that night.'

'Daddy, drunk?'

'It's hard to believe, but he does,' Nick said.

'I wish to God Pierro would get drunk some time,' Yvonne said. 'Roaring wild drunk.'

'You're all woman,' Nick laughed. 'He doesn't get drunk, so you want him to. I get drunk, so you don't want me to.'

'That's not the reason. I'd just like to see him let loose. God, all that's in him and he won't ever let loose. It seems criminal.'

'I'll go along with that.'

'Well, he finally got himself a woman, anyhow. A real woman.'

'No real woman would want him,' Nick said.

'A woman likes to change a man, Nick. Especially a man that's got something to be changed. A lot of women would go damn far to satisfy that desire. Even marry to satisfy it.'

'You're pretty smart, baby.'

'I'm no baby any more, Nick. That's what you don't understand. Better go over and say hello to your girl friend.'

'I think I will. Is she alone?'

Yvonne nodded.

'Well, maybe I'll bring her back here. All right?'

'You'd bring her anyhow if you felt like it. But thanks for asking,' she smiled.

'You're a little bitch yourself.'

'Thanks. I've always wanted to be called that. It's so nice to have a big brother.' She laughed and he laughed too, and got up and started to walk away.

'I think you're all wrong about Pierro's woman though.'

He didn't even turn around, just kept walking, half laughing warmly to himself, feeling the smooth sand give under his feet, feeling the warm sun to his body, feeling good worked-out tired, and clean from the water that was still cool from winter.

Chapter Seventeen

IT WAS a long way from the steel mill district of Gary to St. Mary's, to marriage with a socially prominent insurance broker, to widowhood, to a sanitarium, to membership in the world's oldest profession. It had taken a remarkably short time. At least three and a half years seemed a remarkably short time to Nora. And, as it was with events that transcended the norm, as war transcended it, the events themselves seemed at times but fleeting fantasies, obscure dreams, nightmarish fancies; unnatural and unreal, cloudy and indistinct. As if, yes, the events might have happened, but then again might not necessarily have happened.

In a sense Nora had not lied to Nick when she had spoken to him about her life. It was just that she left out a few things. Like the fact that she was a prostitute. And that she had been in a sanitarium. And that she really hated her father (even though he had been good to her) hated and loved him all at once because she could not help when she was a small child (before her mother had died) but hear through the paper-thin wall between their room and hers how he had abused her mother sexually. At least it seemed

like she was being abused, moaning and crying out like she had the first time Nora had heard them. How vividly she remembered that. And how, later, after the first time, she seemed compelled to stay up and listen, held strangely fascinated even if her mother was being hurt. And how guilty she would feel about the listening. And how confused she was, and disappointed in her mother too, because the next day her parents always seemed unusually happy and hardly ever argued at all. And most important of what she hadn't told Nick, in fact hadn't told anyone except her doctor at the sanitarium, was that her husband had been stricken with his fatal heart attack while they were having intercourse.

That was one part of the last three years that did not seem unreal or cloudy or indistinct. In fact it was quite the contrary: that mental picture was vivid, sharp, distinct. And always it seemed with her as if it was some unearthly spirit that she was possessed by, damned by; evil and satanic, a dark infernal form that would not go away.

Now she was sitting in the living room drinking coffee with brandy and listening to the radio. The night before after a *party* that afternoon with a regular patron from Texas over at the Stevens Hotel, she had gone to an all-night hairdresser and had her hair done and her nails manicured and a body massage, then returned before midnight and to take a sleeping pill and go to bed, after informing her answering service that she wasn't taking any calls.

She had awakened early (for her) and had gone immediately to her bank, as the banks closed at noon on Saturday. She did not have a checking account, but a small savings account, and a safety deposit box where she placed the majority of the cash she had with her (a little over twelve hundred), which brought the total in the box to a little over twelve thousand. Then she returned to her apartment and checked with the answering service. Among the messages there were only two from Nick; however, the girl at the service (Nora had made it a point to occasionally drop by the service with a gift for the girls and to chat a while) said that a voice similar to Nick's had called several times but left no message. At this Nora had smiled. It had been

fun with Nick. And it had been a long time since she had gone to bed with anyone as young as he. As young and as wild as he. The wanting of him, it seemed suddenly to her, to expose and lay bare everything that two people possibly could together. And without any sense of perversion, she thought. At least, in older men it seemed to take on an unclean, perverted kind of form that Nick seemed completely void and unaware of. Maybe that's what she had enjoyed about it. It? I mean him. Him or it? she laughed to herself. It or him?

There were several other messages, one from another member of the profession whom Nora had last seen in Miami, and who had apparently just arrived in town for the summer season up north. Her name was Cindy Polin, a tall, lean, bleached blonde, White Russian girl who had two bastard sons in military school down in Georgia. Nora returned her call, and Cindy said she would be by in a while.

There were three other messages from other clients, which Nora wrote down carefully on her note pad on the table stand, then got up and poured another coffee and brandy. She sat there on the couch in the dark room with the drapes drawn and the table lamps giving dim light, her eyes staring transfixed as if into empty space, feeling the brandy warmly to her empty stomach, seeing again the horrified eyes of her husband looking down upon her as the heart attack had struck, believing the pain that struck him to be that moment of ultimate passion, the noise of the dying gasp to be a momentary cry of ecstatic joy, then the strange rattling, the death rattle from his throat, the rattling sound that now would not go away, still not knowing he was dead upon her, trying to push the dead weight of this elderly man from her as if he were still alive, this man who had been so kind and gentle with her, finally rolling him over and hearing once more, finally, the deep death rattle. Oh God, what had she ever done to have caused this - he was not dead. Dead. Hysterically then trying to shake him alive.

She had, fainted, and when she came to on the bed she did not move for a long while, trying to make herself believe it was all part of an unholy nightmare. But he was

dead. White, naked, hairy, old. Terribly old. He could not possibly be that old. That old. Dead.

She covered his white naked body with a sheet to his waist. The body twitched once convulsively, as if alive, and she began to scream hysterically and outside she could hear the thunder and she screamed at the thunder to go away, at the purple to go away. And beat her hands upon the wall. Scratched at the walls until her nails had bled and the wallpaper was ripped from the claw marks. The thunder would not go away. The rain slashed upon the windows as if the elements themselves were angered with her for what she had done.

Now she sat, her hands pressed tightly to her cheeks, head bowed. Eyes compressed forcibly. Closed tight. Sat there with her hands pressing against her cheekbones until all seemed black. Then quickly she drank the rest of the coffee-brandy. Went into the kitchen and drank another brandy straight, feeling the cold panic sweat of the remembering. The cold panic sweat under her arms and on her forehead. Frenziedly, it seemed, she began to straighten out the kitchen cupboards. Scoured and scrubbed the stove (after putting on her rubber gloves). Vacuumed the living-room. Straightened her closets. Removed all her toilet articles from the medicine cabinet and carefully replaced them. Took a hot shower, soaping herself over and over, as if trying to cleanse her already clean body of some invisible, imperceptible foulness. Standing there in the hot shower until she was all flaccid and limp and inert. Then suddenly turning on the cold in order to revive herself. Dried. Cologned. Put on a plain pink form-fitting silk negligee that revealed no flesh but every line, pausing for a moment in front of the full length closet mirror to study herself for a moment after she had powdered and lipsticked lightly. Then went into the livingroom and called the three 'patrons' who had left messages and told them she was 'busy'. Then got up and put the messages into the kitchen incinerator, after making notations in her own code in her notebook. Then placed the notebook back in the end table drawer, then checked her datebook, swearing slightly when she noted she had a payoff due to the vice squad on Monday and had forgotten, when she had made her deposit, to

keep enough for the payoff. Well, she could probably get it from Cindy, or Hy over at the Four Winds would certainly give it to her, or maybe she'd even let the lieutenant take it out in trade this week. But God, he was a mean sonofabitch in bed. And so easy to taunt, and how she loved to taunt him. The only trouble was, the more you taunted him, the meaner he was in the bed. Certainly, Nora thought, if that bastard didn't have that badge to hide behind, to hide that fanatical drive to dominate and master behind, he would certainly be up there where he so enjoyed sending everyone else. It was a wonder he could even enjoy the bed at all, considering the seemingly consummate pleasure he derived from his own work. Well, maybe he didn't enjoy it really. Maybe he just did it to make himself feel manly, normal. Maybe he just did it for that. I'll bet his wife lives a wonderful life, she said to herself.

Cindy arrived, greeting Nora with an embrace and a kiss on the cheek. She was tall, over five-nine, and though slightly big-boned, appeared lean, and had cropped blonde hair, ringlets of soft wellkept hair; immaculate and very feminine in black. The perfect picture, Nora thought, of what a succesful Broadway actress should look like. And act like. Cindy was always outwardly very gay. Had made today, as always, her usual gay, stimulating and talkative entrance. It was really almost impossible to believe that Cindy was approaching forty-two.

Nora sat back down on the couch as Cindy wandered about the living-room, talking a gay stream of this and that - Miami and a trip she had taken to Cuba - moving about the living-room with a long, striding familiarity, examining occasionally a knickknack, straightening a curtain, as if perhaps it were her own apartment she had returned to, all the while rambling with that easy familiarity, talking to you, it seemed, and at the same time talking to herself. So easily did she move that she did not give the appearance, with all her straightening out and examining, of an nervousness. Rather, actually, of satisfying a simple curiosity which she had a perfect right to satisfy, and when it was satisfied, then she would settle down to normal activity, which after a few moments, she did.

'Coffee, darling,' she said to Nora.

'It's made,' Nora said. 'Drink?'

'I think not,' Cindy said. 'Maybe later. I'll heat up the coffee.' She went into the kitchen and came right back out and sat down on the opposite end of the couch from Nora.

'I spent all last week with the children down in Georgia,' Cindy said. 'Bill's grown so. He's almost six feet tall.'

'Six feet,' Nora said. 'That's hard to believe. It's been a couple of years since I've seen the boys,' Nora said. 'You've been awfully good to them, Cindy.'

'They're good boys,' Cindy said. 'They get out tomorrow. I'm meeting them at the airport and they take an evening train for camp. Won't you have dinner with us?'

'I don't think that would be right,' Nora said. 'You have so little time with them alone as it is.'

'I know they'd love to see you. Bill was a counselor last year. And Bob's going to be one this year. It will be quite a saving.'

'I would like to see them,' Nora said. 'Have they decided what they want to be yet? I mean, any marked ambitions.'

'They don't know. And I don't know what to advise. This war business, Nora. It's damn confusing to these kids. They don't know how long it will last. Or the draft will last. They really can't plan anything. In a way I regret having sent them to military school. I really think Bill would like to be a doctor. But I don't think he'd avoid the army to start his studies. I mean, the military seems so ingrained in him that I think he'd feel guilty if he got a deferment to study medicine - I'll get the coffee.'

'Sit down,' Nora said. 'I'll get it.'

They went out and got it together, then returned to the living-room.

'I really don't know what to advise them. They aren't spoiled anyhow, thank God. And I do think they both want to make something of themselves. Something better than average. I think I'd just as soon see them in the army as living this average American life.'

'They do know what you are, don't they?' Nora asked.

'I'm sure they do. They must. Kids are a lot smarter than people give them credit for being. Well, maybe not so smart. But they sense things. And between what they see

and what they sense they seem to know a lot more than we do at times. I don't think we rely on our senses as much as we should - you know, I really don't think it bothers the boys too much, knowing about me.'

'If you had a girl it would, I think.'

'I'm sure,' Cindy said. 'God, what would I ever have done with a girl - I hear the town's hopping.'

'I don't know where the money's coming from,' Nora said. 'But there's plenty around. So much I think I'm getting lazy. I must have turned down ten dates in the last two weeks - Miami?'

'I had a good year. I got my New York man back. You remember Strauss.'

'I'd like to find one like that,' Nora said.

Cindy held out her arm, and the diamond bracelet sparkled up at Nora.

'That will take care of the kids' college, anyhow,' Cindy said, 'if anything happens to me.'

'Gloomy today, aren't you,' Nora said.

'Those goddamn hoods,' Cindy said. 'They think they're doing you a favour. They really do.'

'Who was it this time?'

'One of the big Dagos - Carmi. How he knew I got into town day before yesterday, I'll never know. They must have the force in their hip pocket.'

'Did you have to?'

'If I want to operate, I have to. All afternoon listening to him blow off his mouth about his joints and the bets he wins. Then four hours in the kip, and he gives me a twenty and says, 'Buy a bottle of perfume, honey'. They're worse than the cops.'

'Almost,' Nora said meditatively. 'They're as cold, anyhow. Did you take the twenty?'

'Of course not,' Cindy half laughed a sardonic little laugh. 'But I probably should have. The way his mind works, he probably thinks I've fallen for him for not taking it.'

Nora laughed.

'I wish you'd come have dinner with the children and me tomorrow,' Cindy said.

'I really don't think I can.'

'Busy?'

'Cocktail party in Glencoe,' Nora said.

'You're kidding,' Cindy said.

'A young army officer. Nick Stratton.'

'Not Old Pete's kid.'

'Old Pete's kid,' Nora said. 'He doesn't know. It's just kicks. But he's no kid.'

'You can't seem to get society out of your system, can you?'

Nora laughed. 'You still think anything that happens north of Howard Street is society, don't you?'

'I don't think I've ever been north of Howard Street, except on the way to Milwaukee.'

'Where did you get the suit?' Nora asked.

'Magnin's. Last year,' Cindy said. 'You look wonderful, babe.'

'I've been getting massaged regularly. I think that helps,' Nora said. 'Do you need any numbers?'

'I don't think so - I'll let you know. I don't think I'll do anything for a few days. I think I'll have a drink.'

'I'll join you,' Nora said.

They went out into the kitchen and Nora took out the ice and filled the container, then took the container out into the living-room and put it on the portable bar. Cindy poured the scotch and Nora the soda, and just before Nora picked up her glass, Cindy put her arm around her and kissed her softly on the lips, and stroked her hair gently, and held her close for a moment.

'Let's have our drink,' Nora said. 'Maybe we'll go to the races this afternoon. Would you like that?'

'That's right,' Cindy said. 'They're on, aren't they. That might be fun.'

'By the way, do you need any furs? I've got a hell of a connection on furs now,' Nora said.

'I've had those before,' Cindy said warily.

'You're protected,' Nora said. 'You even get an insurance policy. I checked it out with my lawyer. He says I can't be touched.'

'I'd like to take a look,' Cindy said. 'This is a good time to buy.'

'I'm having a mink made up,' Nora said. 'Wait until you

see it. We'll go down next week. I've a fitting anyhow.'

'Good. But I want to check these people out with my own man before I buy. If I do.'

'Fine,' Nora said.

Cindy went over to the bar and freshened up her drink, then took Nora's and freshened it up. Then came back over and sat down next to her.

'Well, how about the races?' Nora said.

'Whatever you want, darling,' Cindy said, taking Nora's hand. 'It's wonderful seeing you again.'

Nora smiled.

'I'll dress,' she said.

'All right,' Cindy said. 'I'll come along and talk to you.'

They got up and went into the bedroom. Nora set her drink down on the dresser, and turned and took off her robe. Cindy was sitting on the bed.

'God, but you're beautiful,' Cindy said. 'Firm.'

'Thank you,' Nora said almost demurely.

'Come over here a minute,' Cindy said. 'Sit down next to me a minute.'

'The races,' Nora started to say.

'Please, babe,' Cindy said, and got up and shut the door and went over and took Nora's head in her hands and kissed her.

They made the last two races. Nora looked for Nick in the clubhouse where the party was supposed to be. She saw Raul, and Raul's father, and a young girl with Raul, and Tuttle and his wife-to-be. But Nick was not there.

Chapter Eighteen

WHEN Nick left Yvonne to go over and talk to Ellen the Fair on the beach, he had honestly intended to come right back, with or without her. Instead, he had walked Ellen up the beach. He told her after they had walked a while that he wasn't going to the races, and she said she hadn't intended to go either.

Up the beach, he sat down on a piece of driftwood and she sat in the sand and they smoked a cigarette. She seemed strangely fascinated by the scar of his leg wound just above the ankle. And sitting in the sand she examined the wound professionally and wanted to know where he got it and how he felt when he got it, was it really a hot pain. Then she examined the scars on his face and shoulders and wanted to know how he had gotten each one, then sat back down in the sand staring that strangely fascinated stare at the leg scar, which was very deep and red. Her fingers felt cool and gentle on the leg scar, and with the sun coming almost straight down, hot now, he felt very content.

'It's a wonder the bone wasn't shattered,' she said, still fingering the scar curiously.

'That's what the doctor said,' he answered her. 'How do you know about this?'

'I worked in a hospital for a year. And I was a Red Cross worker at Great Lakes for a while.'

'You didn't mention that last night. Or the other night.'

'I thought I told you. I liked the work. It was hard and dirty working in the hospital. I had never done anything like that. At Great Lakes it was much easier. Except for what I saw in that hospital.'

'The wounded ones?'

'The young ones that were wounded blind. They had them all together. There must have been over a hundred of them. All young. In their early twenties or teens. They had canes and would go to therapy in groups. And you could hear them coming, tapping, from far away. They were so young.'

'I haven't seen many blinded ones. Though one of my good friends was blinded in Italy. I didn't go see him. Though I could have.'

'Why?'

'It would have made him uncomfortable, I think.'

'You mean make you uncomfortable.'

'No - him. I mean that.'

'I heard men got like that. It's hard to believe.'

'It's true,' Nick said. 'Though you may feel uncomfortable later. That is why a soldier always visits another sol-

dier that has tough luck. He has to see for himself. Because everyone who has tough luck increases the chances of your own luck holding. That's why *after* you've seen a wounded one, or a dead one, you feel guilty. Because you somehow feel glad that your chances have increased.'

'That's cruel,' she said. 'Why do you always talk so crazy?'

'It may be cruel. But it's nature. And that's the way nature is. Whether you like it or not.'

'I can't believe that.'

'That's because you're too Catholic.'

'That's not the reason either.'

'I suppose you don't believe a child in the womb is a parasite.'

'What do you know about that?'

'I delivered babies. In the war I did that too.'

'A parasite,' she said. 'You don't even know what a parasite is.'

'A child in the womb is a parasite,' he said. 'It takes all the nourishment it needs from the mother's blood. If the woman does not have what the child requires, the child takes it anyhow. At the mother's expense.'

'I know that.'

'Then, let's face it. A child in the womb is a parasite.'

'I don't like the idea of that,' she smiled up at him.

'Truthfully, neither do I,' he grinned. He was looking down at her pretty little nun's face, with the quick round dark nun's eyes, and at the firm brown body in the two-piece black bathing suit. And over her, as he was, as she still fingered the wound curiously, he could see down the alleyway of her good breasts. She had plenty of tan already this year, he thought.

'How come you weren't going to the races?' he asked her.

'Too much of a production. I like the beach. You know how I've always liked the beach.'

'Yes. We used to come here a lot. I remember.'

'Are you going to the party tomorrow?' she asked him.

'Yes, I think I'll go. I'll see you there, won't I?'

'Yes. I'm going.'

'Who's bringing you?'

'I don't have any date,' she said.

'Oh,' he said. 'Cigarette?'

'I just put one out,' she said.

He lit one for himself, then leaned forward from his perch on the driftwood.

'Nick,' she said, 'don't look like that. Haven't you any sense of decency.' She straightened up.

'I guess not,' he laughed.

'You're impossible.'

'You're kind of hard to figure out yourself,' he said, pokerfaced and serious.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you got practically no clothes on and you wonder why I look like that. Christ, I can't be expected to look at you the same way as if you had on a big old flannel bathrobe or something. Can I? Well, that's silly. I can't, that's all.

'I mean it's not my fault if you're attractive, is it? Matter of fact, it isn't your fault either. I don't suppose I can blame you because you're the way you are, any more than I can blame me for reacting the way you make me.'

'If I ever met a bullshitter in my life -'

'Now they didn't teach you to talk like that at Sacred Heart, did they?'

'And they didn't teach you to look like that in the Army, either - I know that,' she half-laughed. 'You knew how to look like that long before this war started,' she said, adjusting the top piece of the two-piece suit. 'My God, Nick, why don't you act like a human being once in a while. You've got brains. Money. You're young. You've no reason to act like you do.'

With the sudden hound-dog hurt expression of a cocker spaniel that had just been caught urinating on the bathroom rug, he looked down at her, scratching himself on the right buttocks at the same time, as if he could not quite comprehend what she had just said.

'I don't understand,' he said, perplexedly.

'Do you have to get wounded so easily, Nick?' she said.

'Christ, I haven't done anything wrong. I've only been home a couple of days and my family's on my back. Now my friends are starting. I haven't done anything, honest.'

'No, I guess you haven't. But you're about to. I know you that well.'

He took her hand in a friendly way. Well, he'd ask her to take a drive and have a drink. And if she didn't want to go, the hell with her. He'd call Nora. He wasn't going to sit around here and let this rich-bitch lecture to him all afternoon on how to act the way a youthful suburbanite should act.

'I think I'll take a drive,' he said. 'Would you like to come along. Maybe have a drink. Or a late lunch.'

'Is the top down?' she asked. 'I want to get some sun today, Nick.'

'It's down,' he said.

'Good,' she said. 'I'd like a drive in the sun.'

They walked back and picked up her beach towel and when they got to the car, he put on a sport shirt and they drove out west past the forest preserve to a tavern that they had gone to often together back before the war. She was surprised when he ordered a stinger for them. That had been 'their' drink back in the summer when they used to listen to Helen O'Connell sing 'Green Eyes' and 'Amapola,' and she didn't think he would remember.

They had their first drink leisurely listening to the music from the juke box and talking about the days before the war, standing there at the bar in bare feet - he with his sport shirt on, and she with a man's shirt that would have fitted him over her two-piece suit. It was a rustic old place, with a big stone fireplace, that did most of its business at night, but stayed open in the daytime because of the country club people from the three clubs nearby who used to drop in in the afternoons, and sometimes for lunch. It was dark and cool in the place, and now they were the only ones there.

'I don't think I've been here since the last time we were here together,' she lied to him.

'It must have changed hands,' he said.

'Maybe the owners are in the Army,' she said.

'Or dead,' he said.

'Okay, Morbid,' she smiled. 'Or dead. Who was that girl, I mean woman, you were with the other night - Nora.'

'I met her in Chicago,' he said. 'A mutual friend introd-

uced us. I'd never met her before, but I knew her husband,' he lied suddenly, not knowing why he had lied again. 'He's dead.'

'She's a little old for you, isn't she?'

He grinned. 'I don't know if she is or not,' he said. 'She's fun.'

'I didn't think you believed Catholic girls could be fun.'

'How'd you know she was Catholic?'

'We went to the ladies' room together,' she said. 'She went to St. Mary's, you know.'

'Yes, I know,' he said, wondering what this rich-bitch had said to Nora in the ladies' room. Certainly she had tried to bitch it up. She had real talent for that, this one. A real subtle talent.

'You been going with Raul much?' he asked her.

'Raul's a good friend of mine, Nick. You know we've been friends since we were small. Our families have known each other since we were children.'

'Another drink?' he asked her.

'Don't drink a lot this afternoon, Nick. Please.'

'I don't intend to,' he said. 'But will you have another?'

'Yes.'

'Then we'll take a little ride.'

'All right,' she said.

He put his arm around her and pulled himself up close to her right there at the bar while the bartender was making the drinks. And held her close, and bent over and kissed her gently, and felt her fingers clamp on his arm.

'You can be so gentle sometimes,' she said, her nun's face inches from the scar on his face. 'I like you when you're like that. Remember how we used to read poetry?' she said.

'And write it,' he said. 'I wish I could write like you. You could really write if you wanted to, I think. If you'd let yourself go.'

'I still write it,' she said.

The drink came and she played the juke box. The first song was *Rhapsody in Blue*.

'Remember when you read *Green Mansions* the first time? How you wanted to run away to South America?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Then you began to read Ibanez and you wanted to go to Spain.'

'To Valencia,' he said. 'His young books were good. *Flor de Mayo*. *Barrac*. And *Blood and Sand*. That was a good book - *Blood and Sand*.'

'Kipling,' she said. 'And all excited, you wanted to go to India. Do you realize how you used to bore some people about your plans. Kipling said this, and Kipling said that. And Blasco Ibanez said this, and Hudson said that,' she said, laughing.

'We had fun, didn't we,' he said.

'Yes, we did,' she smiled.

'Remember that place we used to go to in the woods and talk?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Let's go there,' he said. 'I'd like to go there.'

'All right, Nick. If you want to,' she said. 'If you're sure you want to.'

He didn't answer, but paid for the drinks, and they got into the car and drove out to the forest preserve, and parked far back, and got out and he took the beach towel and they walked back into the woods on a small trail they knew, then up a slight hill with the trees tall around them and much shade. . . then off the trail, carefully and slowly, she still in her bare feet - they were tender, he could tell, and down the side of a small canyon and into a clearing of flat grass, midst heavy green foliage, near a small stream, he put the towel down carefully, and looked up at her. She was staring at him in that round, slightly bitchy, slightly afraid way she would sometimes stare; and still staring at him, reached up her arms behind her and undid the top piece of the two-piece suit and threw it on the ground, and he stood there as if mesmerized, staring at the young rose fresh breasts and the tree shadows that sliced across her body so quietly; standing there, he suddenly seemed to see, intermingled with the slight bitchery and slight afraidness, a strange sense of power, of mastery, about her and he was suddenly struck half dumb, almost terrified dumb, by the sudden perception (it was so horrifyingly strange). Then she undid the zipper on the side of her suit and slipped out of it, and stood there eyeing him.

'Well,' she said after a moment, 'this is what you wanted, wasn't it?'

He just stood there as the half-dumb terror and shock went away; then the reality of what she had just said began to sink in - angrily.

'Did you have to say that?' he said softly, but tightly. Then began to walk towards her and brought her up close. 'Did you?' he asked, holding her shoulders tight in his hands.

'No,' she said, almost relieved. 'No -' she said fiercely.

It was dark in the woods in the mid-afternoon, and cool from the heavy green foliage and the tall trees. And it was quiet with only bird sounds, and quiet from the lines of sun rays that edged through the trees. They stayed in the woods over an hour and a half and did not speak of poetry or war, or of before the war very much. They had bathed in the small stream, nude, and played their childhood game of splashing water on each other and had gone back to the towel in the clearing and later had bathed again.

In the car she sat close to him and rested her head on his shoulder, and they decided they would ride for a while. As they came out of the woods on to the highway, she began to cry softly.

'What's the matter?' he asked her.

She kept on crying softly and he could feel the tears hot and wet on his bare arm.

'What is it, Ellen?' he asked again.

'Nick,' she said, 'did you - did you have to,' she cried.

Oh Christ, he said to himself, here comes that goddamn Catholic guilt again. He patted her hand.

'I thought everything would be so - so different now,' she said, her voice quivering.

'What's wrong?' he said. 'We didn't do anything wrong. For God's sake, Ellen.'

'Don't you understand anything?' she said with a genuine sense of frustration. 'Consider anything? How anybody else feels.'

He was truly bewildered now, and knew from experience that practically anything he would say would be wrong, so he decided not to say anything, but he was feeling very

uncomfortable, and trapped, and caged in - and suddenly almost panicked - wanting to end this scene, which he felt somehow now bordered on the edge of hysteria as far as *she* was concerned.

He drove straight back to the tavern as quickly as he could without making her suspicious that he was in a hurry. She didn't want to go in, but he held her for a moment, wanting almost to scream as he did so, wanting this business that he did not know how to cope with (and feeling guilty because he did not, and for other reasons) to be over, and she finally consented to go into the ladies' room and freshen up.

At the bar he had a drink for her when she came out. It was straight brandy and he had already decided it was the only drink he would let her have. He knew what she could be like when she felt like this and had too much to drink.

'I'm sorry, Nick,' she said when she came out. 'I guess I just can't explain it to you.' She was still red-eyed.

He handed her the drink and went over and played a couple of Benny Goodman records on the juke box, and came back. She had to call home to see if her father had returned from Chicago, she said. If he hadn't, she had to go home and pick up the car and get her mother at the country club. She made the call and came back.

'Will you pick me up for the party tomorrow,' she said.

'Sure,' he lied. Then, 'Oh God, I can't, Ellen. I promised Raul's father I'd bring Nora. Jesus, I forgot all about it,' he said, taking a quick drink.

She stood there at the bar in the oversized shirt over her black two-piece bathing suit, staring at the brandy sadly with that nun-like sadness, but really wanting for a moment to laugh, to laugh at him and let him know she knew he was lying. What a rotten liar he was when you got to know him. And it seemed suddenly to her that he was always lying, even when he could tell the truth, he would suddenly lie. It made her want to laugh again. He was such a fool sometimes. Such a little boy fool, she thought, staring her best sad, nun sad, stare at the brandy.

'You're in love with her, aren't you, Nick?'

'For God's sake, Ellen, I've only been out with her once. And that was' as a favour to her husband, more or less. I

told you I knew her husband. I didn't invite her to Raul's party. You know that. You were there. You know damn well I didn't.'

'I believe you, Nick. I'm sorry. I'm a little upset. That's all.'

'I'm sorry too,' he said.

'Will you drive me out to the country club to pick up my mother? We could have a drink at the pool out there. Mother would love to see you.'

'Sure,' he said. 'Of course I will. I'd like to see your mother, too.'

They finished and went out to the country club, which was the most exclusive of all the country clubs in the area. There were only eighty-five members, Ellen reminded him on the way out, and six hundred on the waiting list. She didn't have to remind him, though - he had heard it so often. Then she added (she always added it), of course, if Nick's family wanted to join, her father would do everything he could to see that they got in as soon as possible; he was on the board.

At the country club they went to the cabana bar by the pool side. Her mother was playing gin rummy in the sun near the cabana and drinking gin and tonic. They said hello to her and went over to the bar to wait for her to finish. She looked like an older version of her daughter, and was very pleasant, and seemed genuinely happy to see Nick.

Chapter Nineteen

CHURCH that Sunday was quite an affair. When the Strattons had arrived, which was a little after nine, Old Pete sent Mary and Yvonne into the church proper and took Nick down to the priest's office. Only the very highest of the hierarchy, such as Old Pete and Lou Duck and the Stratos brothers, were invited into this inner sanctum of the church where, on Sunday mornings, this elite group

would gather to drink Greek brandy, perhaps even play cards, and pass the time until the collection was taken, which was near the end of the service - usually around one o'clock, the service usually being four and a half hours long.

Nick was really very surprised at being invited down to the office. It was unheard of, anyone as young and unestablished as Nick being invited into the office on Sunday morning. It made Nick realize, heading for the priest's office, that this was indeed a much bigger occasion as far as Old Pete was concerned than Nick would ever have conceived. Indeed, as far as Old Pete was concerned, an event of major proportion.

The office was large, with a single large dark stained mahogany desk. Lou Duck was already there, sitting on the desk. And George Babacharis, also known jokingly as Baby-Carriage, the unelected mayor of Greektown, was there. He was in the coffee business. Some even called him the coffee king. He was a round, big-chested man in his middle fifties, and looked very much like what a politician should look like (that is, if you had an aversion to cigar-smoking politicians). And Mike Swanson was there. He was the candy king, owning a chain of over thirty candy stores. He was short and stocky and white-haired distinguished, and looked remarkably like Old Pete.

The room was heavy with cigar smoke and looked more like a meeting of diplomats than of church directors and officers, with all the men in their striped pants and dark morning coats and ascots. Of course, Old Pete had brought along a sports outfit so that he could change (in the priest's office) after the service and would be properly groomed for the ball game with Nick that afternoon. There was a bottle of brandy on the priest's desk, and Mike Swanson and Baby-Carriage were playing casino, and Lou Dick was kibitzing. It was really all very homey, like a private little club.

Nick was greeted by all. The game stopped temporarily, and everyone had a drink for Pete's happiness over Nick's safe return, and everyone lied about how fine Nick looked, and said how Pete could now take it easy in the business with Nick to work for him. Then the game resumed. Lou Duck began to ask Nick a lot of questions about where he

had been and what he had done and how he found the women in France compared to the women in Italy, and smiling and puffing on his cigar, asked him if he got any of that Chinese stuff. Nick laughed that half sardonic laugh and said that the really talented women were in Greece, which caused a momentary silence in the room, all the men except Old Pete being married to Old Country Greek women; and of course Old Pete was upset by this and immediately changed the conversation to yesterday's baseball game, at which point Nick bluntly switched the subject right back to Greek women.

'No kidding, Mr Duck,' he said, 'nothing like the Greek women anywhere in the world.'

'He's pulling your leg, Lou,' Old Pete said.

'Sure,' Mike Swanson said, 'these kids get smart in the Army. He's a-pulling it.'

'It's the gospel,' Nick said.

'You shouldn't talk about things like that in the House of God,' Old Pete said, suddenly reverent.

All the men crossed themselves.

'No,' Baby-Carriage said, 'we shouldn't talk about such things in the priest's office.'

'I hear we get outta the church early,' Mike Swanson said. 'You fix it, Pete?'

'Yeah. We gotta go to the ball game. So I tell the priest on the phone last night. He started half-hour early. We're out at one sharp.'

'He talks too much lately,' Baby-Carriage said. 'He went almost to two o'clock last week.'

'Yeah, and two old ladies faint last week,' Mike Swanson said.

'They only have two-hour services in New York now,' Lou Duck said.

'That's not good, only two hours,' Old Pete said. 'Pretty soon we be like the Catholics. One hour. Maybe even just half-an-hour. O, those Catholics,' Old Pete wailed. 'They're ruining the world, I tell you.'

'They started this war,' Lou Duck said. 'I tell you, this war started behind those Roman walls.'

'My own opinion is that it started in China,' Nick intervened suddenly.

Everyone looked at him as if amazed, Nick thought, as if he had committed a sacrilege of a sort by entering the conversation at all.

'Well,' Nick said, 'that's my opinion. You mean I haven't got a right to an opinion? What the hell you think I got my ass shot off for - I can say what I damn please!'

'Goddamn it, Nick,' Old Pete said, 'watch your language in church.'

'Sorry, Dad,' Nick said.

'Of course you can say what you want,' Lou Duck said. 'This is a free country. That's what we're fighting for, isn't it?'

'It's a great country,' Old Pete said.

'How do you mean, it started in China?' Lou Duck asked with a slight trace of slyness, holding the cigar in his hand.

'Well,' Nick said emptily (because now no one was paying him any attention suddenly), 'because we didn't protect the treaty ports. And they took advantage of us when we didn't protect what we signed to protect.'

'Nine and out,' Baby-Carriage said. 'That's a hundred and a quarter you owe me, Mike.' Then began to shuffle the cards again.

'We supposed to be drinking brandy, or anything, before communion?' Nick asked Old Pete.

'A little brandy is all right,' Old Pete said. 'This is a special communion for us: You, me, and Pierro.'

'Pierro, too?'

'Yeah,' Old Pete said. 'I thought it would be just us. Father and son. But Mary thought Pierro might be hurt. So Pierro too. He was wounded too, you know.'

'Sure,' Nick said.

'I better go see if Pierro's here,' Old Pete said.

'I'll go,' Nick said.

'No, I'll go. You don't want to get tied up with a lot of people before we take communion.'

'All right, Dad.'

'Some kid,' Lou Duck said, patting Nick on the back. 'I'll bet you had some time for yourself over there.'

Old Pete left.

Nick was looking seriously at Lou Duck now.

'Life's no joke,' Lou said. 'You get as many laughs as you can. War - that's a part of life.'

'A pretty good part of yours,' Nick said in a calm, modulated voice, wondering if Lou Duck would get the dig, and making a mental bet with himself that he wouldn't.

Nick won.

'Yeah,' Lou Duck said. 'I did good during this war. I come a long way in the last few years. I suppose your father told you.'

'Oh, everyone I've seen has told me. Really big. I'm sure glad to hear it. Mr Duck. I sure am.'

'You're a good kid. You listen to your old man and you'll be a big kid some day in this city. You just try and be like your old man. Just one half your old man.'

'I'll sure try,' Nick said. 'Yes, I'll sure try. But there's not many like him,' he said, playing it out to the hilt.

'Now you talk sense, kid,' Lou Duck said. 'Cards? A little casino? A little Stratton money for Lou Duck?'

'Sure,' Nick said.

Nick was not a card player and knew it, and knew Lou was the very best of card players. Nick played recklessly for over an hour and a half, and Old Pete stood behind him moaning and swearing under his breath every time Nick took a wild gamble, but the cards were coming his way, and he took the restaurateur for seventy dollars about as fast as you could take it at ten dollars a game. Lou Duck smiled, but obviously was not pleased, but Old Pete was pleased indeed as Lou Duck paid off. Then all the men spread a deck of cards on the table, and all except Nick drew, and the two highest cards - Old Pete and Mike Swanson - were thus elected to pass the collection tray.

The trays were duly passed. Communion was taken by the congregation, then the priest delivered a long sermon about the war and the contributions of Nick and Pierro Stratton, son and nephew respectively, of that great benefactor of their church, Old Pete Stratton. And of the suffering and longing that Old Pete and his good wife Mary had done for their son and nephew; and the hardships of enduring without their loved ones, the constant threat

with them always that their boys were, for some diabolic reasons that God had not as yet chosen to explain, thrown upon the sacrificial altar of war, where always their fate was unknown. And how by their (referring to Old Pete and Mary) love and faith in God, the two boys had been spared their lives and limbs. Yes, had been spared because of this great faith and love and worship of the church by the good Mary and Pete Stratton; because of this they were here today. By the very God in Heaven above, these were living examples of the power of faith and love and prayer.

Then Old Pete and his two living examples strode up the centre aisle as the chorus chanted their Orthodox Gregorian chant, Old Pete in the middle, holding each living example by the arm, and with tears of pride and joy and faith streaming down his old cheeks, knelt before the priest and kissed the priest's ring, and thanked the priest in Greek for the blessing bestowed upon these two living examples of faith and love and prayer, and proudly stood up with the tears still streaming down his old cheeks, and walked holding each example by the arm back down the aisle as the chorus and now the priest chanted on, and the priest sprinkled the incense, and Old Pete walked up the aisle as straight-backed as any Army general ever, with the even cadence step of the best drill sergeant ever, and with the humblest of his most humble looks spread across his face as if the tears themselves were tears of humility.

After the service, which ended rather abruptly at one o'clock sharp, Nick mingled in the lobby for a few moments while Old Pete was changing his outfit for the ball game down in the priest's office. He spoke to the Stratos brothers, made a date with the younger Stratos for lunch that week, and talked to the elder Stratos's daughter for a while. She was a very Spanish-looking Greek girl a year younger than Nick, and her whole body seemed to exude a vibrant warmth. She was not a good-looking girl. But tall, thin, Spanish-looking, with big round dark gypsy eyes and was strangely attractive in a pagan sort of way.

He kissed and was kissed and hugged by Pierro's mother and sister. And kissed and hugged by numerous other relatives, and by his godfather and godmother, and as he went out the church door, he kissed the priest's hand as was

customary and took a piece of bread from him, and outside he joined with the congregation, being kissed over and over again by his old women relatives and his men relatives, and the tears flowed like confetti on a New Year's Eve.

Nick noticed other soldiers of not-so-wealthy Greek families. Some had many ribbons and one, Nick noticed, had four purple hearts, and Nick was suddenly very embarrassed by all the ceremony that had been performed over him. He was glad to get out of there as quickly as he did.

As the ballpark wasn't too far from the church, they made the game in plenty of time. In fact, as they were coming down the ramp, they made the announcement of the battery for 'Today's Game'.

Charley Grimm came over and shook hands with Pete. And Pete whispered how did Warneke look today - how did he feel? And Charley said fine, and said he thought they'd win the pennant for sure if they could pick up a pitcher sometime soon that would win them five or six games. Pete suggested a pitcher with the Yankees and Charley said that might be a good idea at that, if they could get the American League teams to make waivers on him.

It was common knowledge that all the Cub managers listened with respect to what Old Pete had to say about the team. When Chance managed the Cubs back in '05 and '06, those pennantwinning years, Pete was in the clubhouse before and after every game. And it was true that one time Chance was going to fire a pitcher for drinking too much and Old Pete talked him into pitching the fellow that very day and he went out and won both ends of a double-header, a vital contribution to that year's pennant drive. Also, Pete used to make at least two eastern trips with the Cubs every year. His knowledge of baseball was amazing.

It was a good tight game. At the end of the fifth there was no score, and Nick went downstairs and had a hot dog and called Nora. She was home and he said he would pick her up around four-thirty for the cocktail party at Raul's, which was fine with her. Going into the ninth it was still tied nothing-nothing, and the Cubs came to bat. You could

tell from the nervous way Grimm was acting in the coach's box that he was thinking of lifting Warneke for a pinch-hitter, although Warneke could hit at times. Pete hollered like hell for Warneke to bat, and started everyone around him hollering too. As the pitcher was warming up, Old Pete suddenly caught Mountain Landis, the baseball commissioner's, eye. The Judge had had Pete up once in the old days on a bootlegging charge which Pete eventually beat, though the Judge was sure Old Pete was guilty, and the Judge would have sentenced his own mother, were she guilty. That was the kind of judge he was. When Pete caught Landis's eye, he suddenly put his own arms on the stone railing and rested his chin on them as the Judge was, only exaggerating the way the Judge's jaw jutted out. The Judge turned away in apparent disgust, though Pete knew he was laughing inside, and Pete laughed outwardly and so did everyone around him.

In the ninth, the first man for the Cubs filed out, then Warneke came up. He hit the first ball long and high and it didn't look at first like it could possibly go in, but suddenly you could see the wind catch it and it kind of hung up there, and in it went and the game was over, the Cubs, 1 to 0. Old Pete jumped about a foot and a half off the ground and pounded the stone rail, and as Warneke came toward the dugout, Pete took off his brand new straw hat and hurled it out onto the field and jumped up and down and hugged Nick and hugged everyone around him, and hollered, 'Ahyyyyyee-Ahyyyyyee' real loud and threw his cigar out on the field, and then climbed over the stone railing and started for the dugout.

Nick was terribly worried for a moment, seeing Pete get that excited, with his bad heart and all, but there wasn't anything he could do to hold him down. Old Pete disappeared into the dugout and came out a few minutes later carrying a baseball which he gave to Nick, and then he hollered, 'Ahyyyyyee -' once more.

As they began to walk from the park Old Pete said, 'That's a game, son. That's the way a game should be. Tight. Every play tight.'

'Some game,' Nick said.

'Damn right,' Old Pete said. 'Best game of the year, I tell

you. We'll win it now. When you win a game that way it does something for a team, I tell you. It puts them up. This is some team. Not like the old days, mind you. But the best in years. In many years.'

Chapter Twenty

NICK was early. Nora had only a few minutes earlier gotten out of the shower. In her half-slip and strapless bra and spectators, she was completing her toilet when he arrived. Inside the door he kissed her long and hard. And everything that he had thought about her, driving from the ball park, became suddenly, intensely real. She took his hand and led him into the living-room. He threw his overseas hat on the couch and she went over to the bar and started to make him a drink, her back to him.

'I've been trying to get you,' he said.

'I know,' she said. 'I'm sorry, Nick. I had made plans before we met.'

'Song of India' was playing on the radio and he stood there staring at the sunbrown shoulders against the white strapless bra, and at the back of her legs which seemed to stare back brownly at him.

'Turn around,' he said.

She stopped stirring a drink, then slowly turned around. Her hair cropped, shiny metallic black, glistened redly on top as a sun line seeping through slightly parted drapes touched it. She stood there looking at him.

'Take off your clothes,' he said.

Her eyes held his and she half-smiled. She didn't hesitate, bringing up her leg and leaning over to take off the shoes.

'Not the shoes,' he said. 'I want to see you tall.'

She took off the bra and half-slip and stood there nude and not moving, and he noticed how she was breathing and realized suddenly that they were breathing in unison and he could hear his own breath.

'I like you, Nick,' she said in that strange soft, yet somehow turbulent way, as if now she was talking with her breath instead of her voice.

He started for her, finding it hard to believe that it was all real; finding it hard to believe that there really was such a woman as this one and wondering what he could do to please her for being the woman that she was.

Strangely, they made the cocktail party at Raul's a little after six. Nick was surprised to see Yvonne was there. Tuttle, and Tuttle's bride-to-be stopped by Nick's house on their way in from Barrington. When Tuttle had found out Nick wasn't home, he suggested to Old Pete that Yvonne go to the party with them, and forgetting Nick had a date with Nora, told Old Pete Yvonne could come home with Nick. To Yvonne's (and Mary's) almost complete astonishment, Old Pete readily agreed and while Yvonne was upstairs dressing, Old Pete lectured to Tuttle and his bride-to-be on the pitfalls of marriage, and on the relationship of money and marriage, all of which the athletic Tuttle found to be quite educational.

Yvonne was introduced to Nora. Nick could tell right away that Yvonne didn't care much for her. Then Yvonne slipped away, and a few minutes later Nick saw Yvonne and Ellen the Fair standing near the bar having a martini and talking.

There were quite a few older people there. Raul's father was very drunk. And Raul's mother had a clique of her friends from the Glencoe Little Theatre Group, of which she was one of the original organizers. This group stuck pretty much together, Nick noticed, talking with passionate artistic gestures about art as if life itself really didn't matter as long as there was art around to talk about. Nick and Nora had half a drink with that group and politely drifted away.

Nick did not drink much. He was rather disappointed that some of his old younger friends he had hoped to see either hadn't been invited or weren't back from the war as yet. They tried to avoid the older men and the discussions of World War I. And Nick tried to avoid the older men that he could tell were eyeing Nora. He stayed very close

to her and would not leave her when Yvonne and Ellen came over to talk to them, even though he wanted very much to go to the men's room.

It was a nice enough party; very chic; very North Shore; very suburban. The bar was on the sun porch and the big yard was lit with Japanese lanterns and Nick must have heard Raul's father say to at least ten people that he really wasn't being unpatriotic using Japanese lanterns - the Japanese weren't all bad. Anyone that had invented as colourful a lantern as these couldn't really be all bad. He was very drunk, very happy, in a Benchleyan sort of way.

'The All-American Boy-Man,' Nora said to Nick once while watching Raul's father. 'As if he doesn't give a damn whether there's a party going on or not. Either that,' Nora smiled, 'or he acts like he's the guest of honour rather than the host.'

'If my wife ever brought a bunch of faggoty artists like that into my house,' Nick said, 'that would be all she wrote.'

'Yes, Greek-master,' Nora smiled. 'Let's leave soon.'

'Sure,' Nick said. 'Somehow, the party's a bust. I mean there's an awkwardness in the air. As if half the people don't know what to say or how to act to the other half. Or that half the people are over-conscious of the way they act. Or are thinking about what they are going to say before they say it. Or that everyone has the feeling that everyone else is watching them.'

'This is the kind of party where everyone ends up getting drunk,' Nora said.

'I'm not going to get drunk.'

'You're not?'

'No,' he said. 'But that doesn't mean I feel any more comfortable than anyone else.'

'Aren't you going to tell your sister that we're going soon?' Nora asked. 'She did ask you for a ride home, you know.'

'She got here,' he said. 'I'm sure she can get home all right.'

They were in the yard near the tulip bed, and in the west the last of the twilight was disappearing in that dark, quiet, end-of-day way, and over beyond the Japanese lan-

terns by the bushes the fireflies danced and the thick green foliage dulled the sound of talking groups.

'I don't think your sister cared too much for me,' Nora said.

'Of course she likes you,' Nick said. 'I told you Yvonne's never been around much. She was frightened, that's all. I know how she acts when she's afraid.'

'I don't think she was afraid. I like her,' Nora said, then looked slowly around the yard. 'Let's get out of here,' she said with a sudden and obvious anxiety.

'All right,' Nick said, but unhurriedly.

'Now - Nick,' she said.

'Is something wrong?' he asked, concerned.

'For Christ sake,' she said, 'let's leave.'

'Of course, Nora. But is something wrong?' he asked, taking her hand.

Her hand was rigid, and she glanced at him with an obvious contempt for a second, then opened her cigarette case and took out a cigarette and without giving him a chance to light it, lit it herself.

'There's an old friend of my husband's over there.'

'Where? - Oh, I'm sorry,' he said. And took her arm and without another word, without a goodbye to Raul's family, they left.

They stopped at a famous old steakhouse on 41 and had cocktails and dinner, and after the fine tender New York cut sirloin, ordered a stinger, and after Nick ordered the second stinger Nora excused herself and went to the ladies' room, and when she came back she said, 'Take me home after this one, Nick.'

'Home?' She had been very uncommunicative ever since they had left Raul's house, but Nick was certain it was over the upset caused by seeing that old friend of her husband's, and he had been confident that a few drinks and dinner would cheer her up.

'If you don't mind,' she said. 'Just take me home, Nick. I'm afraid I'm rather upset.'

'Maybe you'd like to go to the Edgewater and dance,' he said.

'Be nice, Nickie,' she said in a condescending mother-to-

son tone. 'Please. We've had fun. Don't spoil it. We'll have more.'

'Fun,' he said, truly perplexed, and fingering the package of Chesterfields on the table. 'Jesus, Nora, it's more than that. At least as far as I'm concerned it's more than that.'

'You hardly know me,' she said pleasantly enough, but somehow he got the feeling that underneath she was toying with him. 'You don't know anything about me,' she said.

'I know all I want to know,' he said.

'Let's talk about it some other time,' she said pleasantly. 'All right?'

She saw his fingers grip on the cigarette package and saw the tight bunched force of his shoulders swell angrily under his khaki shirt and the angry welling of redness on the dark skin of the ancient young-old face and all trace of melancholy leave the eyes that were now quick angry dark, as dark, it seemed, as pitchblende, and, she thought suddenly, under the darkness, as deadly as was pitchblende.

'What's wrong with right now?' he said because the terrible anxiety made him say it somehow, and he hated himself, suddenly, and hated her and it (the anxiety) - hated himself for succumbing as he had.

She calculatingly put her cigarette out in the tray and looked up at him with such an unmitigated look of female frigidity that he was suddenly completely oblivious to whatever it was he had planned to say next.

'Look, Nick,' she spoke composedly but nevertheless remotely. 'I planned a nice evening too. I've a perfect right to change my mind.'

Speechless, he stared at her in that sulking, bewildered yet violent way of a wounded animal. For a moment she couldn't tell whether he was, like an animal, going to turn upon her, or run to seek refuge, or just remain there sulking and bewildered.

'You got another date? Why don't you say so -' he said. 'Why don't you come out and say it?'

'If I had, it wouldn't be any of your business, would it, Nick?' she said in that soft and composed way that still completely defied the frigid way that she held her head and moved her lips when she spoke and rested her hands on the table.

Then suddenly he wasn't thinking about anything that she had done or said, or that he had done or said, only that somehow for him it always ended up this way. Somehow just when he thought it was going to be different - somehow, some way, it was always taken away. And this time it wasn't him that had taken it away -

What right did she have to do what she had done? What right to make him believe as she had made him believe, then to do this to him - and suddenly he wanted to hurt her just as much as she had hurt and degraded him, and in the process, hurt and degraded, in a sense, he thought, all decency and human dignity by her infamous deception.

'You're like all the rest,' he said. 'Just like all the rest.'

'And what are you like?' she said suddenly not so composed.

'You goddamn Catholic Polack son-of-a-bitch,' he said, slowly, deliberately.

With that she knew that she had him, and knew that he knew he was now had, and all her composure returned, augmented by this new confidence.

'Go ahead, Nick,' she said coldly and composedly. 'Keep it up. Show me how very much you're like all the rest - How foulmouthed. Race prejudiced. Narrow - like all the rest. Go ahead and show me - now.'

Ensnared, slowly, he took a slow drink, trying to take advantage of the Time, the very same Time that only moments before he had defied because *he* had decided that this thing must be resolved here and now, as if *he* had owned the one and only license to all Time.

'I'm sorry, Nora. I didn't mean that. You know I didn't mean that,' he said with a sudden desperation.

'Keep talking, Nick,' she said. 'Keep talking and you'll see how very much you really are like all the rest,' she spoke composedly.

'You don't give a damn, do you?'

'Are you asking me or telling me, Nick?'

'Asking you.'

'I don't know.'

'Then you don't,' he said.

'I didn't say that.'

'You mean after all that's happened - and you don't give

a damn,' he said. 'My God, what kind of woman are you?'

'You don't own me, Nick.'

'Christ, I didn't say I did, did I?'

'You didn't say it. But you act that way.'

He paused for a moment, running his hand through his hair perplexedly. 'Yes,' he said defeatedly, 'yes, I guess I have - Would you have one more drink here with me, Nora? Would you?'

'If you won't act like this I will.'

'I told you I was sorry,' he said. 'I told you, didn't I?'

'Yes,' she said. 'You told me. Order up then. And pay the check.'

He called for the waiter and ordered the drink and the check, then looked back at her.

'I just want to know where I'm at - that's all. You can't blame me for that.'

'You can't know everything exactly when you want to know it, Nick. You know that by now. Certainly you've grown up enough to know that.'

'I love you, Nora. For Christ's sake, can't you tell that I love you?' he said. It was only the second time in his life that he had ever told a woman that he had loved her, and he was surprised now that he had said it, and surprised at how easy it had been to say it. The first time he had been only thirteen, and the girl, eleven.

'Maybe there are a few things I want to know, too,' she said. 'Maybe your attitude's really a little selfish. Did you ever think of that, Nick?'

'I really am sorry for what I said, Nora,' he said. 'You know damn well I didn't mean that - don't you?'

'No, I don't think you did mean it.'

'Can we stop - I mean forget it. The whole thing. Like it never happened.'

'It shouldn't have started in the first place,' she said. 'I only asked you to take me home. You knew I was upset.'

'I'm sorry,' he said again, but now he was conscious of saying it and because he was conscious of saying it he somehow was forced to add his very best, most subtle-hound-dog look. 'But you don't know how I feel about you,' he said truthfully, the look evaporating.

'Or me about you.'

'I love you,' he said softly, reaching out for her hand. He took the hand which was frigid at first and then began to feel the life come into it. He could see from her mouth that she was about to say something and said 'Nick,' softly, and up came the waiter with the fresh stingers and he had to take his hand from hers.

She raised her glass. 'Let's forget,' she said.

They toasted to that.

'Maybe we could go to the Buttery or somewhere and talk,' he said. 'I want to talk to you some place quiet.'

'But you promised you'd take me home after this. Remember?'

'Couldn't we have just one drink at the Buttery or somewhere? Wouldn't you like that?'

'Not tonight. Please, Nick.'

'Well, tomorrow then?'

'I thought you had that dinner with your cousin. Gus the Goat, or whatever his name.'

'I can call that off.'

'That wouldn't be fair, Nick.'

'Gus wouldn't mind,' he said.

'I'm afraid not tomorrow, Nick.'

'Tell me, will you, is there someone else?' he asked, the horrifying anxiety somehow making him ask, as if truly he had no control whatsoever over his own tongue. 'Just tell me if there is.'

'I told you once,' she said, 'that if there was someone it wouldn't be any of your business. And I don't think it is your business any more now than it was a while ago.'

'Then there is someone else,' he said frantically.

She put her drink down abruptly. 'I'm going right now,' she said. 'Are you going to take me? Or should I call a cab?'

He was conscious now of the other people in the dining room and had the sudden feeling that everyone was watching them, and had been watching them, and wondered if anyone had overheard the way she had been talking to him. He put his drink down. She started to get up.

'Jesus,' he said, 'give me a chance to leave the tip.'

She stood there looking down at him as he fumbled with the change then he got up and took her arm and walked out with her.

In the car he asked her if she wouldn't stop by the Buttery for just one drink and she said no that the way he was he would probably only start it all over again.

'I'm sorry, Nick,' she said in that cold remote way of hers.

He tried to hold himself together. Tried not to say anything, but somehow he had to say, 'You do have a date, don't you? You knew it all along, didn't you?'

She didn't answer.

'For Christ's sake, tell me. Just tell me. And I won't see you again. I won't call - if you don't want me to. But for Christ's sake answer. Give me the courtesy of an answer, at least.'

'No, I don't have a date,' she said.

Then he really felt like a fool.

'Can I call tomorrow?' he said softly, subduedly.

'If you like. I won't be home most of the day though. Call about one. I should be up by then.'

'All right,' he said, and pulled up in front of her place.

'Can I come up for a minute? Just a minute,' he said.

'Some other time, Nick. All right?' she said in that pleasant way she had of saying things.

'I'll walk you to the door,' he said.

'No,' she said, and reached over and kissed him full and hard on the mouth and got out. 'Goodnight, Nick.'

He drove away. When he reached Michigan he decided to go back. She was lying to him, he felt. He parked the car round the corner from her apartment building and walked across the street from her building and waited in the shadows. He felt terribly humiliated and supposed that now she wasn't even thinking of him. He hoped for a moment that he had really hurt her calling her what he had and that maybe she was upstairs there now in the apartment crying over it. Then again the picture came into his mind of her selling newspapers on the street corners of Gary when she was a little girl and he felt guilty for having said what he did, and guilty too for standing down here and waiting, and hoping in one way that she had told him the truth and was not going out, and hoping in another way that soon she would come down and go out so that he wouldn't be such a fool for standing down here in the shadows spying on her.

Spying? Spying, hell. He wasn't spying, really. No, he was finding out whether or not she was telling the truth. He might as well find that out and get it over with. And if she was lying, if she didn't have enough insides to tell him that there was someone else, he wouldn't want her anyhow. Who the hell wanted to be married to a liar? To a woman you couldn't really trust. - Well, not him. Maybe some men would give in to a woman like that, but not Nick Stratton.

He had been standing there almost a half hour when she came out the door and stood under the canopy while the doorman hailed her a cab. Quickly he went around the corner and got into his car thinking that he could catch the cab on Michigan and follow her. He made Michigan quickly and the light was green but when he looked down the street there were about eight cabs and he couldn't tell which one was hers.

Frustrated and outraged and feeling very taken in he drove around feeling that if he ever got close enough to her he would like to spit on her and degrade her and let her know how he knew that she was lying. He decided he would go over to the Four Winds, thinking that she might be there. He went in but she wasn't there. He had a casual drink with Hy and subtly probed to find out where she might have gone. Hy only knew of one other place where she might be and Nick went over there and she hadn't been there in six months the bartender said.

He drove back past her apartment. He wondered if he ought to try and slip the doorman a ten to let him in and go up and wait for her. Then suddenly he decided to go back to Los Caballeros where the crowd from Raul's party would now be, probably.

All the way out north he thought about her, and wondered what made her lie, and thought again how she must have looked selling newspapers, and remembered again how fine she was in bed and then began to really believe that he was in love with her and felt wretched for being in love with her.

It was a little past twelve when he got to Los Caballeros. Yvonne was sitting up on the bar telling stories when he

got there. And most of the rest of the party, including Raul's father and the group from the Glencoe Little Theatre, were all there around the bar.

He walked up to Ellen the Fair. 'I'm sorry I took so long,' he said. 'She asked me to drive her out to the south side to her aunt's. Then I had to go in and meet the aunt. I got back as quick as I could.'

'You missed it, Nick,' Ellen said. 'Your sister just did a Greek dance for us. She brought down the house. What are you drinking?'

'I'll have a stinger with you - will you?' She nodded and he ordered the stingers.

'Where did you ever find that tramp?' Yvonne leaned over and whispered to Nick.

'Nora?' Nick said with a hurt expression.

'Nora,' Yvonne confirmed.

'I'll tell you all about it,' he whispered. 'But you've got her all wrong, baby.'

Yvonne laughed a knowing womanly laugh.

'Dance with me, Nick,' Ellen the Fair said.

'Sure. You know I think I'm beginning to like this dancing business. We won't stay too long, though. I've got to go down to the office with Old Pete tomorrow.'

'You're going to work, then?'

'Maybe,' he said. 'I don't know. Recite me some poetry while we dance, will you?'

'All right,' she smiled her nun's smile.

And they silently toasted each other with the stingers and drank them half down with that happy defiance and vengeance with which they all seemed to drink and started out towards the dance floor.

Chapter Twenty One

THE next day Nick went to the office with Old Pete. Old Pete was very proud showing Nick around, and especially

proud when he showed Nick last month's financial statement which Nick could not quite comprehend. Nick was surprised to see what a fine office Old Pete had, and Old Pete ranted for a while on all the money Mary had spent decorating it. At the Old Timers' Baseball luncheon, Nick excused himself and called Nora. Nora acted as if they hadn't had any argument at all and they made a date for dinner Wednesday night.

Monday night Yvonne and Nick had dinner with Old Gus at his shack as they had planned. It was the finest dinner they had ever had there. The dandelion greens were excellent and the lamb was tender and they drank much wine and sang while Old Gus played his zither and later the three of them went down to Halstead Street. They picked up Old Joe of the one eye and went over to the Acropolis and did the Greek dance and sang some more and had a fine time. And while they were at the Acropolis, Joe got Nick to agree to go fishing in Florida instead of Wisconsin.

The next night Nick had dinner at Ellen's. Then Nick and Ellen and her mother and father all went out to the country club and played bingo, then Nick and Ellen went out to Los Caballeros and had a couple of drinks with Tuttle and Raul and Raul's girl Speedy-Weedy. Nick was surprised to see Pierro and Marci walk in around twelve o'clock and asked them to join their party at the bar. But Pierro said no, they had just come from a concert at Ravinia and were going to have a sandwich in the dining room.

Wednesday Nick had dinner with Nora. They went to the Buttery and then went back to her apartment as if they never had had any argument at all. It was quite a night in her apartment. Nick didn't say anything to her about seeing her go out after he had taken her home the other night. Mary was upset the next day because Nick hadn't come home and asked him all kinds of questions about where he had been and what girls he had seen and how he ought to watch out for women as they were liable to corrupt the high moral standards that she had set for him.

Thursday night Nick went to Pierro's for dinner. Yvonne went too. They ate early and left early and after Nick took Yvonne home he went out to Los Caballeros by him-

self and sat around with Raul, and Tuttle, and Tuttle's bride-to-be and talked about the war and about business until Nick was sick of that talk and went home and went to bed.

Old Pete got through the Peru crisis without a scratch. He even had the Peru paper print a retraction of its implication regarding Interstate. And Interstate presented the girl who had been critically hurt by the flying glass from the homemade bomb with a year's pass to the Interstate theatres in that town. And Old Pete himself issued a statement that reflected on the tactics employed by the Union people.

Yvonne and Nick spent almost all of every day on the beach. Ellen sat with them a lot. Nick was getting very tanned. Each day he would run up the beach a little farther and he was in the best condition he had been in since before he was wounded the last time. It was very busy around the Stratton House in Winnetka. The day of the wedding was approaching and Mary and Old Pete were both very busy with a lot of the details and once in a while Nick and Yvonne would help out by running an errand for Mary or driving down to Chicago to pick up a package for Old Pete. Mary got another stay-in maid to help out. Sophia moved out to Winnetka to be near Mary as there were so many things they had to do together.

Old Pete had phoned his friend John Rakis, the theatre man, down in Atlanta. Rakis said he would be happy to come to the wedding and bring his daughter Pat. Old Pete could tell from the way John spoke on the phone that John must have pretty much the same idea for Nick and Pat as he, Old Pete, had. Old Pete was dying to tell someone that John Rakis, one of America's richest (if not *the* richest) Greeks was coming up for the wedding Old Pete was throwing for his niece. But he was getting just as much pleasure keeping it to himself, too, and visualizing how everyone would react when they saw his son Nick with Pat Rakis and his nephew Pierro with Marci Prescott.

Old Pete was very easy to get along with that week. He gave Mary some extra cash and slipped Nick a cheque for five hundred and told him it was a little coming home present. That was on Friday and the following Monday

Nick's bank statement came in the mail and Old Pete opened it, 'by accident' he said, and when Old Pete saw that Nick had over nine thousand in the bank he was very upset over having given Nick the five hundred and told Nick about it and censured Nick for not having bought something nice for his mother and sister when he had all that money in the bank. And wondered how Nick could possibly have accumulated all that money in his four years in the army. And told Nick that he really shouldn't leave all that money sitting around in the bank. That what he really ought to do was take about seventy-five hundred of it out and let Old Pete put it to work for him. But Nick knew better than that. He knew he'd never see his money again if he turned it over to Old Pete and Nick told Old Pete that he had some plans for the money himself. And when Old Pete asked him what his plans were he said he was thinking of going into the coin operated machine business with Raul and Tuttle.

Nick and Nora got along fine. As if they never had had an argument. Nick saw quite a bit of her and talked to her every day on the phone and had thought several times of marrying her. And wanting, too, very bad to talk to someone about how he felt about her but didn't know whom to talk to - he couldn't talk to Yvonne because he knew Yvonne didn't like her at all. In fact, it seemed that lately Yvonne didn't like anyone except Ellen. Had even gone to lunch with Ellen twice.

By the end of that week, Pierro had quit working altogether. He accepted a luncheon invitation from Old Pete on the following Monday. He was very surprised Old Pete asking him to lunch at the Camellia Room of the Drake and even more surprised when Old Pete told him to bring Marci along. Pierro couldn't quite figure that out. But once when Marci went to the ladies' room, Old Pete told Pierro that the reason that he had wanted him to bring Marci was because he was thinking of asking Marci's father for a favour, Marci's father being very influential with a certain politician whom Old Pete had wanted to reach for some time - then went on to subtly elaborate on the importance of the Prescott name in all influential circles of Chicago life. •

Everything was really going along fine on all fronts. At least it was until the following Thursday when things erupted abruptly at the Strattons' in Winnetka. It happened as usual at the dinner table.

'Well,' Old Pete said, 'I gotta little surprise for you, son.' It was during the coffee right after Old Pete had lighted his ten-cent cigar. 'And for you, too, Mary.'

'It certainly has been a happy home since you came home, Nick,' Mary said.

'We've had fun, haven't we?' Yvonne said.

'Don't you want to hear what I got to say,' Old Pete said. 'I've had a hell of a time not mentioning it before.'

'Of course we want to hear,' Mary said. 'Don't we, Nick?'

'Of course, Mother,' Nick said.

'Yes,' Yvonne said slightly plaintively, 'I'd like to hear myself.'

'Well, guess who's coming to the wedding,' Old Pete said with a wry smile of satisfaction on his face. 'Guess?'

'The mayor,' Mary said.

'Oh, he's coming,' Old Pete said, 'I thought I told you that.'

'The governor?' Mary questioned.

'No,' Old Pete said, 'he's a Republican.'

'Charley Grimm,' Nick said, wondering if Old Pete would get his attempted sarcasm.

'Grimm will be there, I think,' Old Pete said. 'Hartnett will be there for sure. And Mordicai Brown. And maybe Hack Wilson if I can get a hold of him. But you're not even close, Nick.'

'Gypsy Rose Lee,' Yvonne said winking at Nick.

'Yvonne,' Mary said, 'have some respect.'

'The King of Greece,' Nick said, 'King Paul.'

'No, no, no -' Old Pete said. 'John Rakis, that's who. My old friend, John Rakis, that's who. And he's bringing his daughter. How do you like that, Nick? You'll have the most beautiful Greek girl in America, in the world maybe, for the wedding. And John Rakis' daughter besides. What do ya think about that?' Old Pete said smiling, satisfied.

'I ain't taking her,' Nick said abruptly.

'You -' Old Pete started.

'Nick -' Mary said.

'I got a date for the wedding,' Nick said staring at his coffee cup and sulking.

'If it's Ellen, I'm sure you can get out of it,' Mary said.

'It ain't Ellen and I'm not getting out of it,' Nick said.

'What do you mean, Nick - ain't?' Mary said. 'I didn't teach you to talk like that. You know better than to use ain't.'

'Ain't for effect,' Nick said in that half-lazy, half-sardonic way of his. 'Which means NO. N-O.'

'Goddamn it, Nick, watch how you talk to your mother,' Old Pete said.

'I didn't start this,' Nick said.

'Well, I'm gonna finish it,' Old Pete said.

'Go ahead and finish it,' Nick said. 'But get someone else to do your dirty work. I got a date. It's a free country.'

'What the hell kind of son I got,' Old Pete said. 'Yvonne, what kind of brother you got talks to his mother and father this way?'

'Nick's got a date,' Yvonne said.

'You keep out of this,' Old Pete said.

Nick laughed.

'What's so funny?' Old Pete said, 'what's so goddamn funny?'

'Stop it this minute,' Mary said.

'Stop what?' Nick said. 'For Christ's sake I ain't done anything but laugh. Is it a crime to laugh, too?'

'Nick, your language is atrocious,' Mary said. 'I didn't bring you up to speak like that. Why if someone heard you what would they think of me?'

'He oughta be ashamed. He oughta get down on his hands and knees and apologize to God for acting this way towards his mother and father,' Old Pete said crossing himself Orthodox fashion. 'He's so goddamn dumb though I don't think he's got brains enough to be ashamed.' Then Old Pete crossed himself again, crossed himself as if gesturing to God for God's help for his son, who God in Heaven must know needed help awful bad.

'I'm not taking that girl,' Nick said. 'And that's final.'

'He must be crazy. Ca-ra-zy,' Old Pete said. 'He must be Ca-ra-zy,' Old Pete looked at Mary unbelievably.

Nick got up. Threw his napkin on his chair. Looked sardonically around the table and left.

'Don't worry, Pete,' Mary said soothingly, as soon as Nick was out of earshot. 'We'll work it out. It'll all work out.'

'You shouldn't approach Nick like that, Daddy. Really you shouldn't. He's terribly touchy since he came home.'

'It's the war,' Mary said. 'Some people will just never know what our boys went through.'

'I can't understand that kid. He must be nuts. That hit in the head must've hurt him worse than the doctors said. I hate to say it but by God it must of.'

'Peter,' Mary said. 'Don't talk like that.'

'Please, Daddy,' Yvonne said.

'Who's he taking?' Old Pete asked Yvonne.

'I think it's Nora,' Yvonne said.

'Who's Nora?' Old Pete asked.

'It's *that* woman from Chicago,' Mary said.

'What woman?' Old Pete asked.

'A widow,' Yvonne said. 'A rich widow.'

'A widow!' Old Pete said and crossed himself again. 'Why the hell hasn't someone told me about this, Mary?'

'Now don't get excited, Pete,' she said. 'I didn't think it was anything serious. Why didn't you tell me, Yvonne?'

'Who said it was serious,' Yvonne said. 'Besides, no one asked me.'

'I never know what's going on around this place,' Old Pete said. 'Goddamn it, Yvonne, why don't you tell me about these things? How am I gonna protect your brother if you don't tell me about these things?'

'I don't know anything,' Yvonne said.

'Oh,' Mary threw her hands to her face and began to cry. 'Oh, my God, my poor Nick.'

'Mother,' Yvonne said.

'What's wrong with her?' Old Pete asked Yvonne poker-faced.

'Oh,' Mary cried again, 'my boy.'

'For Christ's sake, what's wrong with you?' Old Pete said bewildered. 'What's going on around here?'

'Oh,' Mary practically wailed. 'That's who he's been with when he hasn't come home. I know it. I feel it. You

know how I feel things. I knew he was getting mixed up with the wrong woman. I could feel it.'

Yvonne felt so like giggling that she rushed from the table into the kitchen where she busted up giggling and laughing and listening.

'For Christ's sake he's a man,' Old Pete said. 'What you expect? Thank God he's a man, anyhow. Instead of like that sissy cousin of his.'

'Pierro?' Mary stopped crying abruptly.

'Who else,' Old Pete said.

'Peter Stratton, you've a foul mind. A rotten dirty old mind.'

Old - Old Pete repeated to himself. Old. These goddamn women. These rotten women when they're mad. Always hitting below the belt.

'You're nuts,' he said. 'You're all nuts around here. What the hell kind of family I got? What kind of family did I raise? Tell me what kind of family - hiding things? How's man gonna protect his family if he don't know what's going on - Mary, you ought to be ashamed.'

Mary started to cry real hard and got up and left the table.

Old Pete followed her out of the dining room into the living room but she continued on upstairs. He paced back and forth in the living room puffing on the ten-cent cigar and Nick came in from the porch.

'You oughta be ashamed,' Old Pete said to him.

'Of what?' Nick said.

'Of upsetting your mother like that.'

'Like what?' Nick said.

'Making your mother cry.'

'I didn't make her cry.'

'I suppose I did,' Old Pete said.

'You do most of the time,' Nick said.

'You ought to be ashamed,' Old Pete said. 'Ashamed - you ought to apologize to God for the way you speak to your mother and father. The way we worked and slaved -'

'I know, I know,' Nick said.

'I think mother's gonna faint,' Yvonne hollered from upstairs.

'Get up there to your mother, Nick. Apologize to your mother.'

Nick just stood there staring at the old man for a moment, feeling suddenly very sorry for him; sorry because he knew that now that maybe Mary *was* going to faint Old Pete wouldn't be able to stand the sight of it, wouldn't be able to go near her anymore than he could go near anyone that was sick. It frightened him so seeing anyone sick. God, Nick thought, it must be terrible to be so afraid of dying. Afraid like Old Pete was. It was pitiful seeing anyone that afraid of anything.

Nick went upstairs. Mary was not faint, nor about to faint, Nick knew at once, but was nevertheless putting on a very fine performance of one about to faint. Even the tears were no longer genuine. She was on her chaise longue and Nick sat next to her and she pulled his head down on her shoulder and patted him and told him how much she loved him and that really she would never believe Nick could ever do anything that was really bad, it wasn't in his nature or his upbringing.

He felt very awkward sitting there next to her knowing that the tears were not veritable tears, and wondering if what she was saying to him was what she really believed. She stopped crying after a while.

'I think I'll get Old Gus and Old Joe and go fishing for a few days,' Nick said.

'I think it would do you good, son,' Mary said, 'to get away from *that* woman for a while. Where will you go?'

'Florida,' he said, 'but I'll be back for the wedding.'

'You're not driving, Nick, are you? Please. You know how afraid I am of automobiles.'

'I'll be careful, Mother,' he said.

'You have St Christopher, don't you, Nick?'

'Yes,' he lied. 'I've got the one you gave me the day after I got home,' he said wondering now where he had put it.

'Can you get enough gas stamps?' Yvonne asked.

'I think so,' Nick said.

'When will you go, dear?'

'In the morning if I can,' he said.

'You don't believe those things your father said about Pierro, do you?'

'Of course not, Mother.'

'He has a terrible suspicious mind. You must forgive him for his ignorance, son.'

'Of course I will, Mother.'

'You know he's never had the advantages that you and I have had. We must forgive him for that,' she said dramatically.

'Yes, Mother,' Nick said.

'It's so terribly sad that he hasn't acquired any culture along with his success. Don't you agree, Nickie?'

'Yes, it's very sad.' He was holding her hand now. 'Won't you have a little brandy? I think it would help to settle you down.'

'No. No thank you. You know how quickly the slightest bit of liquor goes to my head. I'll be all right. You go along, son. As long as I know you forgive your father I'll be all right. You do love him, I know that.'

'And you,' he said softly, meaningfully.

'I know you do. I know you're doing the right thing getting away from *that* woman for a while. You go up and get your fishing things together. They're all there as you left them.'

'I'll be back for the wedding,' he said, 'I've got to go down and see Gus. And call Joe.'

'It's too bad your father isn't going with you.'

'I don't think he'd enjoy it too much,' Nick said. 'You want to ride down to Gus with me, Yvonne?'

'Sure, Nick. If Mother's all right.'

'You go along, dear,' she said dramatically. 'I'll get along.'

'All right,' Yvonne said.

Nick kissed his mother and got up and went downstairs after telling Yvonne he'd meet her in the car. Downstairs he called Joe and told Joe he was ready to go and Joe said fine he would be ready in the morning.

Nick walked out through the sun porch starting for his car. Old Pete was on the porch reading the paper.

'How's your mother?' he asked.

'Fine,' Nick said, nearing the door.

'Where you going?'

'To Florida,' Nick said.

'Where?' Old Pete braced up and put the paper down.
'Florida. To fish. With Gus and Joe. We're leaving in the morning.'

Chapter Twenty Two

OLD Gus was waiting outside his shack when Nick arrived. He was standing there with his fishing pole in its canvas case, holding it like a staff, and his old brown canvas bag and his battered old wooden fishing box and his zither were on the dew fresh grass before him and in his right hand he held his three goats leashed together. Nick knew Gus had not been waiting long, that somehow he knew exactly when Nick would arrive. It was really very strange to Nick seeing Gus standing there in his old work clothes with his goats by the little shack with all the tall buildings of the city around him in the clean freshness of the early morning.

They embraced and kissed each other on the cheeks and Nick carried the bag, box, zither and pole to the car while Gus led the goats. They put the goats in the back seat of the convertible and as they drove along Old Gus hummed to them. Two of them stood facing each other in the back of the car and the other lay placidly curled up on the seat. Nick noticed how placid the goats were, as if somehow Gus's humming actually did have an effect on them.

They dropped the goats off with Gus's friend at his old carbarn off Halstead Street. Gus gave them careful instructions on how to care for the goats and then they had a cup of Turkish coffee with him, as it would not have been polite to refuse, and chatted with him about where they were going and what they would do and when they expected to be back. Then they got in the car and went over to Little Joe's of the one eye. They parked the car in front of his diner. On the window there were already two crudely painted signs. One in English and one in Greek: *Closed for Fishing Trip. Indefinite.*

They knocked on the door and Joe let them in. They all embraced and made their greeting and Joe told them to sit down and have a cup of Turkish coffee and a brandy while he finished preparing the lunch that he had been cooking since three that morning.

You could smell the lamb cooking. After Old Gus and Nick had their coffee and brandy at the counter they went back in the kitchen where Joe was.

'I clean out the place,' Joe said. 'No sense we waste what we have on hand.'

'I'll baste the lamb for you,' Old Gus said.

'Fine,' Little Joe of the one eye said. 'Nick, you get one of those bags and put those eggs in the bag. We have over two and a half dozen boiled eggs. And half the baked ham. One salami! A whole lamb which we will eat cold. And I have seven bottles of resin wine all packed. Tomatoes. Onions. All fresh. Some celery. The salt and pepper I have already packed in with the wine in that box - We will eat well.'

'This should hold us to Florida,' Nick said.

'To Nashville,' Old Joe said.

'What is this going to be,' Old Gus said, 'an eating or a fishing trip?'

'I have a friend in Nashville,' Old Joe said. 'We will eat and drink and sleep for nothing. That is the kind of friends I have.'

'I think we should go fish first,' Old Gus said.

'Me too,' Nick said.

'We think about it on the way,' Joe said. 'Why rush? We were not born to rush. We will do as we please. And split on the gasoline.'

'What of the gasoline?' Old Gus asked.

'I have stamps,' Nick said. 'I got them last night after I saw you. From Sam who has the garage in our neighbourhood.'

'He must be Greek to have so many stamps to give away,' Old Joe said. 'The Greeks have more stamps for everything than anybody in the cities.'

'He is Greek,' Nick said.

'I knew it,' Joe said.

'This lamb will not be done for another hour,' Gus said.

'At least an hour,' Joe said.

'We should be on the road by now,' Nick said.

'We do not take this trip to rush,' Joe said. 'You must learn to take it easy. You have rushed enough these last years, Nick. Have another drink.'

'I'm driving,' Nick said.

'Yes, he must watch his drinking if he is driving,' Gus said.

It took them two and a half hours to finish cooking the lamb and to finish packing up the other things and to start. They argued over where they would spend the first night and where they would stop to eat the food Joe had prepared and the route they would take. Old Gus and Joe had crossed themselves Orthodox fashion when they had gotten into the car and prayed out loud for a safe and happy trip and then argued all the way to Dwire, Indiana. At Dwire Nick suggested that Old Gus play his zither. Gus began to play and they all began to sing Greek songs and Joe, sitting in the back, was drinking of the Greek wine and occasionally telling Nick how to drive though he had never driven a car in his life.

In Nashville they stayed with some friends of Joe's for a day. The friends owned a shoe-shine stand. They were very happy to see Joe and meet Nick and Gus and prepared huge meals and Little Joe, almost seventy, got very drunk on the resinous wine again and danced the Greek dance with such passion that Nick became very frightened for him. Nick enjoyed the food and the drink but did not especially care for the mother of the family as Nick could tell the mother at once had an idea for Nick and her daughter. Her daughter was very dark, very pimply, short, stocky, and knew it, and seemed to be ashamed of it in a way that made Nick feel sorry for her and sorry, too, for the poverty they lived in though Nick knew that many Greek families who lived very cheaply in poor districts had much money and property and he suspected that they were one of these families.

After they left Nashville they decided to drive straight to Florida. They spent one night in Clearwater with Joe's friend who had a bar there. It was a big night. They ate at the friend's house and drank all evening in the bar and did not pay and after the place was closed Gus got out his zither and the owner had some of the local Greeks in and they

danced and sang and ate until the sun came up, then Gus and Nick started for Marco in the Ten Thousand Islands after making arrangements to meet Joe in Tarpon Springs.

It was very hot that day and rained several times but they left the top down. Nick and Gus were both very tanned from driving all the way with the top down. Nick drove fast and steady all the way to Marco. They checked in at the Marco Island Inn a little after eleven that night and took separate rooms. They were both too tired to even inquire about the fishing that night.

Nick was up with the false dawn, wide awake quickly with a strange excitement within him and the warm, balmy gulf wind coming through the window and the sound of the water of the bay lapping out near the docks mollifying the excitement, feeling all at once downy pliant supple clean-from-the-sun-tan but not tired anymore, never tired anymore, not pulpy anymore, but sharp, acute, wired, ready for the air, the sun, the water, the extending all of himself.

He dressed quickly in khakis and sneakers and put on his old (how very old) khaki shirt with the sleeves buttoned down to protect him from the mosquitoes and rubbed mosquito repellent on his hands and over the now gruff four-day stubble of beard.

He went next door to the old man's room. Old Gus was already awake in his bed. Nick said he would meet him in the lobby. Gus was down in five minutes. They walked down the stairs of the hotel towards the dock. In front of the inn, Nick stopped and stared at the bright orange blossoms on the big royal Poinciana tree.

'The snook are here. They are in to spawn. Not all in. But almost,' Nick said.

'How do you know this?' Gus asked.

'That tree. For over seventy years it has been true that when the blossoms of that tree, in front of this lodge, are at the full of their bloom the peak of the snook spawning is on. It has never failed I have been told. Sometimes it blossoms in mid-May and sometimes at the end of June. Even July several times, I heard. But that is when the snook come in from the sea. When this tree blossoms.'

Nick looked at the old man now staring at the big Poinciana, looked at him as he stood there in his black work

boots with his baggy old brown pants and wide suspenders and his denim workshirt, tall and slightly stooped, with that sweet sad smile on the Christ's face and almost shaved grey-black hair, and those kind melancholy black eyes. Nick just stood there looking at him, the long arms that came almost down to his knees and the huge bony hands and those kind eyes that did not waver from the tree.

'Let's go talk to the dockmaster,' Nick said gruffly. And started for the shack at the far end of the dock.

The dockmaster was the same one; old, bald, more Indian than French, with a deeply tanned ruddy face and great crevices of lines in his face and powerful forearms and a great swelling chest and a huge chaw of tobacco distorting his right cheek. He was working on a motor outside the shack and did not look up for over a minute until he had finished what he was doing. He did not speak then but stared at Nick for a moment, then his vulture eyes shifted to Gus, then back to Nick, waiting.

Nick, remembering him, did not speak for a moment then said: 'Hello, Jean. You look the same.'

There were seconds of silence.

'You don't remember me then,' Nick said.

'Yes. But not from where or when.'

'I'm Nick Stratton,' he said, 'and we fished together the year before the war. And we fished apart and had a contest and I won ten dollars from you and you took me to Molly's beer joint and drank up the ten dollars and got into a fight with Larry and got beat bad.'

'Christ,' he said, 'what happened to you? The war?'

'Yes,' Nick said. 'But I feel better than I look.'

'My kid got killed,' he said with no search for sympathy nor trace of apathy. 'At Normandy.' He chewed on the tobacco, then spat, then picked his nose. 'Snook, eh? Well, there 'ere. Big ones. You can get him 'ere at night. Or this morning when the tide changes, meb-bi.' And spat again.

'How's Caxambas?'

'You wanna fish Caxambas?' he asked warily.

He was a Big Marco Pass man and knew the spots here but did not fish Caxambas and was easily irritated, Nick remembered, by anyone that fished Caxambas with success.

'Maybe,' Nick said.

'Well, you can fish anywhere you want. You want a boat?'

'I asked how the fishing was at Caxambas,' Nick said.

'I ain't heard – much,' he said. 'Who's your friend?'

Nick introduced Old Gus.

'You wanna boat. I got a good boat.'

'I'm not takin' any boat from here, out in that Gulf, without twin engines. Is that boat over there with the twin Evinrudes yours?'

'That's mine, he said. 'That'll cost you more. Twenty a day,' he spat. 'Plus gas.'

'I'll take it. For five days,' Nick said.

'Awright,' he said. 'I don't know why you don't get a boat from up at Caxambas though. As long as you're going to fish there.'

'I like that boat,' Nick said.

'Awright,' Jean said. 'Take it. It's your business. You can fish wherever you damn please,' he said nastily and went back to work on his motor.

Nick grinned and turned and winked at Gus.

'We can take the boat from here,' he said to Gus, 'and go out the pass here and follow the beach south about six miles and we come to Caxambas. With those motors we can run it in twenty minutes I think. Then we can leave all our crap in the boat every night. And we won't have to haul the fish back in the car. Let's get our stuff.'

They loaded their gear and water and picked up their fishermen's lunch boxes, which Nick had ordered when they arrived, and were out through the pass and following the beach along the gulf all in a half hour. There was a good breeze on the water but very hot already. When they hit Caxambas Nick stayed to the right, the south side, and followed the line of mangrove keys that were lined in an arc as far as you could see. To the left there was also an arc of keys and between the two arcs there was a good two miles of water. Channels ran along the edge of the arcs but the centre was mostly sand bar and coral formation and several small keys. They followed the channel about two miles down and Nick cut in towards the centre away from the arc of keys, away from the deep of the channel and slowly hand over hand gently lowered the anchor casting distance from a mound of coral protruding from the water.

'The tide is not as far in here as at Marco. We will try some top water plugs here for the smaller ones. I have the correct baits. Spooks.' They were big artificial top water baits with three treble hooks. As you retrieved them you worked the tip of the pole and the bait was made to move from one side to the other, Nick explained to Gus as they were fixing their equipment.

Nick, using his spinning rod and eight ounce monofilament line, was ready first and cast out long and easily dropping the bait in softly about four feet from the coral and began to work it back slowly. Old Gus stopped working on his line and watched Nick as he worked the bait and studied his wrist action. Old Gus knew it was all in the wrist. Nick made several more casts retrieving at different speeds and finally threw out towards the farthest point of coral and began to retrieve rapidly, Old Gus watching – and *wham* the water erupted midway between the coral and the boat and the snook came rushing angrily out of the water all golden on top with its great mouth spread wide and gills spread and you could plainly see the black lateral line that bisected its long slender built-for-speed body and the sun between the clouds reflecting on its silver underbelly and the droplets of water scattering from its furiously attacking bullet shaped body and up almost three feet out of the water and down and there was Nick's bait some twelve feet in the air floating, – floating slowly downward. Nick was shaking visibly.

'He missed it,' his voice quivered.

'Holy,' Old Gus said, 'I have never seen a fish strike like that. Holy!'

Nick smiled, shaking. 'So goddamn quick,' Nick said. 'Jesus, I never expected it that goddamn quick. He was a good one. Ten pounds, I'd say.'

'Holy,' Old Gus said. 'Ten pounds. That is the biggest ten pounds of fish I have seen. It is frightening when they strike. I swear it.'

'You must retrieve fast,' Nick said. 'They are only taking it fast,' he said working the bait rapidly back now. 'When they miss, if they do not knock the bait in the air, keep it working. They will usually take it again.'

'Holy,' Old Gus said, rapidly now working on his gear.

They did not get another strike there. And moved and

worked three more coral formations. At the third one Old Gus had a strike that made him grin all silly but the fish missed and they decided after a while, with no more strikes, to go farther back where the arcs of keys joined and clustered and work the tree stumps and shady holes under the overhanging brush along the shorelines of those keys. They worked them for over half an hour and the tide began to slow, Nick noticed, and suddenly while they were casting under the overhanging mangrove branches of one key they were working the snook began to slap at their top water baits with their tails almost every cast.

'Now they are playing,' Nick said. 'Not hitting. They will not hit now until the change. Let's find some shade and a beach and have some water and maybe a sandwich. I'm hungry.'

'Fine,' Gus said.

'We'll move out a little towards the Pass. Over there,' Nick pointed about a mile away. 'There is sand beach. We can change our baits on the beach. We will fish deep with heavy dudes when the tide has changed. They have to be heavy to get down in this swift tide,' Nick said and began to pull up the anchor, then before he started the motors: 'I will make this run slowly so you can see some of the bird life. And marine life.'

They started off slowly going between the small mangrove keys until they came to the channel along the arc. They saw several ospreys and many hawks and a pack of turkey vultures, some with great five foot wing spreads, as they soared through the air in wide circles and broad spirals, never moving only adjusting their wings as they glided effortlessly. And they saw a great blue heron and several egrets and a multitude of pelicans and along one protruding coral reef were a group of flamingos.

'Nowhere in America are there birds like here,' Nick shouted to Gus above the sounds of the motor. 'There is a great eagle's nest not far from the Inn, I remember. We will look for it when we have a chance. It is the nest of a bald eagle.'

They saw schools of mackerel and trout working over small bait and a large school of tarpon frolicking and leaping in the channel near the sand bar and one great hammerhead

shark basking in the sun on the top of the water. It was at least ten feet long and caused considerable comment from Old Gus. Huge sting rays and whip rays leaped and landed flatly, resoundingly on the water all around them. It was very warm now a little after eight in the morning and the sky was slightly overcast with the sun coming through occasionally and all the time they had been in the vast bay they had seen only one other boat and that was a great distance away. Then they were approaching the beach. Nick stood up looking to see if there was any coral or rock and when he saw that there wasn't, only a gentle upgrading of sand, he told Gus to hold on and gunned the motor and beached the boat. Nick pulled the boat up onto the sand as far as he could and they got out and walked back over twenty feet of white sand and in the shade of some small mangroves they ate a ham sandwich and drank some water then split an apple.

'I think I would like to live here,' Gus said.

'I have thought that,' Nick said. 'But I don't seem to be able to give up the city. When I came back I wasn't even going to go home. Now it looks as if I am going to stay.'

'You will work it out,' Gus said. 'It takes time to work things out. Patience is the most important thing. If you have patience then everything will come in good time.'

'It's the one thing I don't seem to have. Why must I live in the city? What in the hell is wrong with me? I like it here better. I have always loved it here. Or places that are far off like here.'

'Your woman does not make too much difference here, does she?'

'I hate to say it but no. But tonight I will call her.'

'You shouldn't do that,' Old Gus said. 'That won't help anything.'

'I know it. But I'll call her anyhow. I do things like that. I know they're wrong before I do them but I do them anyhow - God, I feel good.'

'Who wouldn't - here?'

'Old Pete,' Nick said. 'If he was here he would be worried. And worrying us. He would be wondering if his partners were stealing. Or if his wife was out with someone. Or if my sister was getting laid. No, he's no goddamn fun

on a fishing trip. Except when the fish are striking. He can't fish worth a shit anyhow. He gets too excited. And he doesn't know what the hell he's doing. And he's always trying to run me in the boat – and, come to think of it, out of the boat,' Nick grinned. 'The hell with him. Christ, but it's hot.'

'I like the sun. I can take the sun,' Old Gus said.

'Pierro wouldn't like it here, either,' Nick said. 'I went fishing with him once. It bores him. It really bores him. You wouldn't think it would bore him. With that artistic sense he has. I mean being out on the water. In the open. But it does. He shows no emotion when he fishes.'

'Yes, but that doesn't mean that he doesn't have any emotion. He has much, really. Of that I am sure. I have felt that even when he did not show it.'

'I have felt it, too,' Nick said. 'God, how I have felt it. Like an electric current. Look, a racoon.'

'I saw it before,' Old Gus said. 'But what is that thing that crawls upon the beach?'

'Where?'

'Over there,' Old Gus pointed.

'A horseshoe crab. They are something. They walk on land. On the bottom of the water. They swim. They drift. They have it made.'

'I saw a sea robbin once,' Old Gus said. 'At the aquarium. That is something to see. A fish with wings and feet.'

'There are plenty around here. They will bite you like hell in a boat.'

'Will you work for your father?' Old Gus asked.

'For a while, I think. I don't know,' Nick said. He was lighting a cigarette and Gus noticed the sudden constrained look on his face, the wrinkling of his forehead. Sitting there, the lit cigarette in his hand, Nick fingered the four-inch scar along his left cheek and jawbone under the four-day stubble of beard, the sweat pouring off the old but young face with the slightly flattened, twice busted, nose. How old he looked, Old Gus thought. How old-troubled for one so young.

'By the time we are done with this place you should know,' Old Gus said. 'If you are patient. I would not worry about it. Think about it if you wish, though. It is good to think about some things. At least better to think about them than to kill

yourself making yourself think or do other things just to forget about the very thing you should think about. Very complex, eh?' The old man smiled. 'Complex. That's some word for me, eh? I bet you wouldn't think your cousin would know such a word.'

'I wish I knew what you did. Or was satisfied in the way you are.'

'You will be.'

'Not if I stay around Old Pete. I feel that. As long as I stay around him I will be like him. He's too much for me – the sonofabitch.'

'I'll bet you know lots of sonsabitches. And like lots of them.'

'That's funny you should say that,' Nick said. 'Boomer, he's a friend of mine, and I were talking about that on the train coming home.'

'Your father – he is strong,' Old Gus said. 'Part of his strength is his patience. You could well learn things from him. There are things in *him*, too, that it would be good to learn. Some things to keep. Other things not to keep.'

'I suppose,' Nick said. 'The tide should change in an hour. Then we'll fish. It's good there is this wind. It's too much of a wind for mosquitoes. I've hardly been bitten,' he said and leaned back, his hands under his head, looking up through the mangrove branches to the white clouds and the blue sky where the clouds separated and up very high he could see birds circling. The birds were up as high as the clouds and he wondered what kind of birds they were. They must be turkey vultures to be up so high, he said to himself. Then he smiled to himself remembering the time that he had gone duck hunting with Red in Italy and they had been drinking brandy in the cold of the early morning before they had even gotten into the boats and how funny Red was, all show business, reading *Variety* religiously, how three guys from his, Red's precinct – not neighbourhood or parish or Bronx, Nick remembered, but three guys from his precinct had made it in show business and he was going to make it too, and Red half sentimental drunk that cold Italian morning with ice beginning to form on the lake amongst the reeds, Red sharper and funnier than he had ever heard him, Red seeing the lone goose flying far off against the grey sky so gracefully, Red saying

so seriously: 'Ain't it a shame, Nick, he don't even know he's flying.' Then saying it again and damn near crying, damn near seriously sentimentally crying. God, how terrible it was seeing *him* dead. Not a mark on him dead. Thinking he was all look dead. No, goddamn it, they don't. He didn't. No, he sleeping and trying to kid him awake but dead. They don't just didn't look dead. Did he?

I wonder how I will look when I am dead. No one is going to see me, though. No one. That is going to be in my will. And there will be no public funeral. I will fix that with my lawyer. My wife will not even be permitted to come to my funeral. No one.

But you will die. Everyone dies. The earth will die. Like you the earth is only on a journey. From a primeval cloud of cosmic dust through ages of mountain building, through ice ages, and continent changes, until finally it gave life. But it will die. It is inevitable that it will die. The sun will redden and swell and the earth will boil, then as the solar fires wane it will circle the void in a cold lifeless entombment round and round the dying sun.

Oh God, what then?

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust – Oh God, what then? Was that all – all there was to him, too? That can't be all. It can't be.

And Old Gus watching him lying there knew there wasn't anything that he could say or do.

That same morning, at about the very same time Gus and Nick were walking down to the dock, Old Pete Stratton was pacing the bedroom floor of the Winnetka house. He had earlier that night dreamed that he was walking with Mary down a hill in his native Greece. In the dream Mary was wearing her white wedding dress and he was barefoot. Since, he had awakened several times in cold sweats.

It was a bad dream, he knew. It was bad to dream that you were going down. And to dream of white meant death. He did not know what it meant to dream he was walking again in his bare feet, but once in the night he had deduced that it might mean that he was going to die penniless.

He had faced the east, as was customary, and prayed each of the three times that he had gotten up. He had said the

'Our Father' and then a special prayer in Greek asking God not to let him die yet as his work on this earth was not yet finished. He had told God, as God well knew, that Mary needed him, and Nick needed him, and Yvonne needed him. That without him, they, having been sheltered from all the practical things of this earth and all too willing to believe and trust in strangers, would certainly lose all that he, Old Pete, had worked and striven for to give them security. Besides, he told God, he had not finished his work with the Church of Verdamah. He was going to build a bigger, better church. And there were so many things he wanted to do for the people there.

It was certainly a terrible dream, he thought now in the early morning. Oh God – it was *Mary* in the white dress in the dream. That didn't mean Mary was going to die? Not Mary. Mary was too young. Too healthy. Mary had never had a sick day in her life. Maybe, though, it was the drinking. Maybe she was drinking herself to death. Maybe God was going to punish him and Mary for her drinking. Oh, MY GOD! I will have to talk to her again about this drinking. Maybe I can go see a Catholic priest. Maybe we could go to some church on the west side of Chicago where we wouldn't be known and get Mary to take the oath. If I told the priest how she was drinking, how her drinking was ruining us, disgracing us, certainly the priest would make her take the oath. If the priest was any kind of a priest at all he would make her take the oath, he told himself. Even a Catholic priest would have to face up to that responsibility.

Then, in his mind, he saw his own bare feet just as he had seen them in the dream walking down the hill. I've got to watch my money, he said to himself blotting out the picture of the dream. I've got to start to save more. Maybe, though, the dream meant to watch out for the Stratos brothers. Maybe it wasn't a bad dream at all then. Maybe God gave me a warning because *they* were trying to break me. I picked them out of the gutter, too. Right out of the jail. The gutter. That's what happens when you treat someone too good. I gotta watch out. Watch my deals. The war's gonna be over soon. What then? I wonder if there'll be another depression. I'd sell out now if I thought there'd be another depression. I wonder what I could get. But remember what Green said. Remember what he said about there being a boom. About

BUILDING. About the *new* AMERICA. That was one smart Jew, that Green. One goddamn smart Jew banker.

That was a terrible dream, though. God, I got troubles – A crazy kid. A wife that drinks. And two partners who are brothers. You can't beat blood. You don't suppose that dream meant something might happen to Nick. You know how that crazy kid drives a car. And the way he's been drinking lately. He gets that from his mother. He must. I wonder where he's at. The least he could do would be to call his mother. The way his mother worries. You'd think he'd have the decency, the respect to call his mother and let her know where he was and that he got there safe. Kids ain't like they used to be. God, what's happening to this world? Wars. Killing. Drinking. Crazy kids with no respect. Parents throwing their daughters to boys. Partners you can't trust. God, what did I ever do to deserve this?

'Mary,' he began to shake her. 'Mary,' he said, feeling a cold sweat on his forehead, and under his arms, and between his legs. 'Get up. Get up.'

'Yes, Pete. What's wrong? What's wrong?'

'I don't feel so good,' he said. 'I don't feel so good at all. I hardly slept. I had terrible dreams. I think it may be my heart.'

She was up quickly. She made him sit down on the chaise longue and felt his forehead and took his pulse. 'I'll get you a pill,' she said. 'Your pulse is fine. But I'll get you a pill anyhow. And a brandy.'

'I don't want any brandy.'

'It will be good for you. You know I know what's best for you when you're not feeling well.'

'Yes, Dolly,' he said. 'I love you.'

'I love you, Pete.'

'Come over here and kiss me.'

She went over and put her arms around him and kissed him hard and then held his head for a moment against her breast. God, but she was good in bed, he thought. No matter whether they had had an argument or not she was always good in bed. She was wonderful that way. And the way she nursed him when he was sick. She was really a good wife. She didn't know anything about the world but a man couldn't have a better wife than Mary. Or prettier.

She left and brought him his pill and a glass of water, then went downstairs to get him a brandy. When she came back he was stretched out on the chaise longue. She gave him the brandy then got out her horoscope book. She read to him and told him that really there wasn't anything to worry about. It was all there in the stars – really there wasn't a thing to worry about at all.

'What about Nick?' he asked finally, when she was done telling him that really there wasn't anything to worry about. 'What't it say for Nick?' he asked.

She looked up Nick in the horoscope and said there really wasn't anything to worry about Nick. After all, Nick was a Leo. A lion, truly. Really that was why Nick and Old Pete argued. Not because they didn't love each other but because Old Pete was an Aries and Nick was a Leo. They were bound to argue.

'I don't care what the stars say,' Old Pete said. 'The stars will help you, sure. But you gotta help yourself, too. You gotta help the stars to help you. That's what worries me.'

'Nick's a good boy.'

'You don't understand, Dolly. I'm looking for his future. For his place in the business world. People aren't the same in the business world. You gotta be able to take care of yourself. What does he know about taking care of himself? He never worked. He didn't learn the hard way like I did. You gotta have experience.'

'Yes, Pete. How do you feel?'

'A little better,' he said sipping on the brandy. 'The Greeks make the best brandy in the world,' he said. 'I wonder if that kid delivered that brandy to John Rakis down in Atlanta.'

'Nickie will deliver it.'

'If he'd marry that girl he'd be set. *Set*, I tell you,' he said and pounded his fist down onto the arm of the chaise longue.

'Be calm, Pete. Calm now. I'll go to church today and have a mass said for our special intention. The success and happiness and marriage of our son.'

'Will you, Dolly?' he said. 'Will you?' the tears began to come into his eyes.

She moved up the chaise longue and put her arms around him and he cried softly for a moment, then he gently pushed her away and gulped down the brandy, then set the glass on

the night table and took her in his arms and kissed her passionately on the mouth.

'Oh, Pete, Pete,' she said. 'It's only five thirty.'

'I know it,' he said. 'I know it.'

'Are you sure you feel all right, Pete?' she said, holding his head in her hands now and kissing his cheeks and eyes and ears. 'Are you sure, Pete?'

'Yes, Dolly. Yes,' he said. 'I feel fine. Fine,' he said. 'Lock the door. Lock the door.'

And she got up and went to the door and locked it.

Chapter Twenty Three

MOLLY's was very crowded with the same old sea-creviced faces that it was crowded with every night. It was an old wooden building with a creaky old wooden floor and half of the building jutted out over the water of the bay and when the piano player was not playing you could hear the water lapping underneath whenever, which was seldom, the talk quieted enough. The islanders were boisterous people. Nick sought out big, old, fat, toothless Molly and she remembered him. He introduced her to Gus. They sat down at one of the old wooden tables with the twisted steel-framed chairs and Nick saw his old friend Larry from the fishing camp down at Caxambas and Larry came over. He was mostly Indian. They shook hands around. The piano player was playing loudly.

'I hear you fished my pass today,' Larry said.

'And you heard we got three and lost two,' Nick said.

'That's as good as anyone this year. You look old.'

'I went to war,' Nick said. 'How come you didn't go to war?'

'I'm too old.'

'You are like hell,' Nick said. 'You're not over thirty, thirty-two, are you?'

'I'm forty-five,' he grinned. He had about the whitest,

most perfect teeth Nick had ever seen. He was dark, not Indian dark, but sun-tanned layer upon layer dark and looked something like a younger Jack Dempsey, Nick thought.

'Honest?' Nick asked seriously.

'Honest, Injun,' Larry said. Nick couldn't tell whether he was kidding or not.

'Your wife's not over twenty,' Nick said.

'I've got a new one since I seen you. That other died with child. This one is sixteen. All French and Spanish. Pretty,' he smiled. He looked at Gus's thumb all bandaged and grinned.

'You selling any tackle down there now?' Nick asked.

'I fix him up with a nice salt water spin outfit. He needs it, bad', he winked.

'Will you teach him how to use it?' Nick asked.

'I taught you,' Larry said.

'Spend the morning with him,' Nick told Gus. 'He will teach you. He will teach you more in one morning than you will learn in six months anywhere. Will you?'

Gus looked at his thumb. 'I give in,' he smiled.

'He reminds me of someone,' Larry said. Then to Nick: 'You buy an island? I got a good island I'll sell you cheap.'

'Where?'

'Not far from Pelican Key. You remember Pelican. Where the educated man lives in the shack.'

'Yes. What is it called - this key of yours?'

'Dismal Key,' he smiled. 'It is over half a mile long and growing. And has a fine beach. You can have it for four hundred.'

'That's a good name for a Key for him,' Old Gus said. 'That would be something to own one of these keys.'

'We'll look at it,' Nick said.

'When?' Larry asked.

'Tomorrow.'

'Fine. It will be a perfect key for you.'

'How much did you pay for it?'

'I won it in a poker game,' he said.

They were all about finished with their beer. 'I buy a beer,' Larry said. 'It's the custom to buy soldiers beer, I hear.' He grinned. He hollered over above the music of the piano play-

er, over the voices arguing about a hand of cards, to Molly to bring them a beer.

'Tell her to bring one for herself on me,' Nick said.

'She's not drinking.'

'She always drinks, I thought.'

'No,' Larry said seriously, 'she is measuring tomorrow so she is not drinking.'

'Measuring?' Nick asked.

'Yes. It takes much out of her,' Larry said.

'What do you mean – measuring?'

'There is a baby with short growth. Molly is one of the few left that can fix that.'

'I don't understand.'

'Of course,' Larry said. 'Well, this baby will not grow. So Molly takes a piece of string and measures the baby from head to foot. Then she measures the foot seven times folding the string back and forth the length of the foot. Whatever the string is short is how short the baby is.'

'Short of what?' Nick asked now very curious. Gus was watching Larry attentively.

'Short of what it should be. In other words, you fold the string seven times the length of the foot, then if the end of the string ends up in the middle of the foot that is how short the baby is. The shortness of the string is in proportion to the shortness of the baby. Then the string is wrapped around something like a door hinge. There it will wear out. As it wears out the baby grows. But it takes much out of Molly. She prays very hard when she measures the baby, which she will do at sunrise tomorrow, and as the string wears out and the baby grows it takes much from Molly. She is one of the two women left on the island who can fix short growth. She may not take a drink for months. But the baby will grow.'

'Always?'

'Always,' Larry said very seriously.

'Can I see this?'

'If Molly will let you. I think she will. You're a religious man.'

'Not in the strict sense,' Nick said.

'I know,' Larry said.

'You,' he said to Gus, 'I know she will let you come. You have the look of a saint anyhow.'

'Saints don't drink beer,' Old Gus said.

'I'll go ask Molly,' Larry said. He got up.

'I believe, then I don't believe,' Nick said. 'It must be faith. But how can a baby have faith?'

'The baby doesn't have to have it,' Old Gus said. 'I believe it can work.'

'I saw strange things in Burma,' Nick said. 'And India. And they worked. I don't know why I should doubt they could happen in America.'

'The baby does not need faith, I don't think', Old Gus said. 'Maybe it is the woman who transmits it. Like you have seen a crazy person. Complete insane. With fear of all. With no brain function. Yet that person will allow a certain kind of person to approach him and will not be afraid. It is something like that. Like dogs and cats that have been fear stricken young and are afraid of certain kinds of persons and of others have no fear. The person must transmit that.'

'Maybe,' Nick said. 'I never thought of it that way. But maybe, too, it is in the glands of the person. They say dogs can tell your fear by the secretion of your glands.'

'And in India they say in some scriptures that the liver is the seat of the soul. And in some scriptures that the glands are the seat of the soul. So the person, nevertheless, must transmit it. Even if it is in the glands.'

'So you think babies have an extra sense? Like dogs?'

'Can you say they don't?' Old Gus said.

'No. In fact I would be more inclined to think they do,' Nick said.

Larry came back and said it was all right - Molly said they could watch the measuring.

The next morning Old Gus and Nick were up at four-thirty and at five-thirty in a field near the water next to Molly's beer joint. There were about twenty old islanders there. Molly stood alone near the water. A young girl: thin, pale, Madonna-faced, with long straight bleached-from-the-sun-hair hanging to her roundless buttocks, came forward holding a baby. Molly began to pray as the girl and the child came forward. The measuring took place exactly as the sun came up over the horizon and Molly prayed in a murmuring voice, piously. Nick and Old Gus noticed that many of the

others prayed, too. It did not take long. Molly walked away, round and fat and waddling, with her head bowed. No one moved until she had gone inside her beer joint. The girl and the child standing by the edge of the water with the big red sun behind them made a strange sight. The mosquitos were very thick and the baby was crying. When Molly was inside, everyone walked away.

They went with Larry and looked at the island he had offered to sell Nick. Nick bought it at once. And then contracted with Larry to have him build a small shack on it for six hundred dollars, which would make a very nice camping shack, and Larry promised to drop in on the island from time to time to make sure things were intact and no one occupied the shack. Then Nick and Gus fished the rest of the day, an out-tide, for snook. They got eleven, the smallest eleven and one-half pounds and were tired at end of day. That night they went down to Molly's and Nick talked Gus into bringing his zither and Gus played and Nick taught the islanders the Greek dance. They had much fun.

They got some heavy tackle from the dockmaster and went for tarpon the next day. Gus lost seven of them and Nick had two on and landed one about eighty pounds and released it. Next day Larry and Nick took Gus down into the lower islands, then, after renting an air boat near Everglades City, they went far back into the bog, palmetto, pine, scrub, creeks, brooks and lakes of the Glades. They saw many alligators, and deer, and wildcats, and gars, and water moccasins. There had been heavy rains in these backwaters lately and the smaller islands were covered with hugh rattlesnakes coiled and inert, their eyes closed but striking at anything that came near. Once far back they heard a thunderous noise as if a sea were erupting and minutes later they saw a tremendous school of largemouth bass pass right through them feeding frenziedly on a school of minnows.

They fished out the week stopping by Larry's occasionally to go over the plans for the shack. Nick still had not called Nora or home. He had thought about calling Nora several times but when he had thought of it he was not near a phone, and when he was he did not seem to think about it, so he never called. •

They had a big wild drunk at Molly's with Gus playing the zither the night before they left. Then they drove over to Palm Beach. Joe was there waiting. Nick did not feel like staying with Joe's friends so he took a hotel room. He spent every day on the beach, and walking the beach, and did not join with Gus and Joe and Joe's friends except for one dinner which he felt he had to attend, otherwise it would have been impolite.

They decided to drive straight through to Chicago. They arrived there about three in the morning and left Old Joe at his place first.

'Some trips,' Little Joe of the one eye said. 'Some trips.'

'Get some rest, Little Joe,' Old Gus said. 'The wedding is day after tomorrow.'

'I not even open my place till after the wedding.'

'Christ,' Nick said as they were getting Little Joe's bag out of the car, 'Christ, but I haven't even bought a present.'

'I have,' Little Joe said. 'And I paid one hundred dollars.'

Then Nick drove Gus home and headed out north. It was five in the morning when he got to the Winnetka house. The front door was locked and he had to ring the bell. Old Pete opened the door.

'I oughta throw you right out,' Old Pete said.

'What's wrong now?' Nick asked.

'Your mother's been crazy nervous.'

'Come on, Dad. I'm tired.'

'You oughta be ashamed not letting your mother know how you were.'

'If there was anything wrong you'd have found out,' Nick said. 'I dropped your liquor off in Atlanta. There was no one home. They had already started for Chicago, for the wedding.'

'The girl's here,' Old Pete said.

'In the house?' Nick asked.

'Yeah. The old man's at the Edgewater.'

So, Nick thought, he thinks he's going to shove her down my throat. Well, I'm still taking Nora.

'Can I bring my stuff in?' Nick said starting in. 'Did the fish come? I shipped a hell of a lot of fish.'

'No.'

Nick brought his stuff inside.

'Nick, your mother's been crazy worried.'

'You told me that,' Nick said tired.

God, but he looked a hell of a lot better, Old Pete thought.

'We'll talk about it in the morning. You be careful around the girl now. You know she's my friend's daughter.'

'I'll be careful.'

'And you gotta help the next couple days. You know the wedding's day after tomorrow.'

'I know,' Nick said. 'Good night, dad.'

Old Pete came over and kissed Nick good night. Then Nick began to bring in his bags and equipment.

Chapter Twenty Four

YVONNE woke Nick a little after noon with a cup of coffee:

'You look wonderful, Nick,' she said.

'We had fun,' he said.

'Pat's here from Atlanta,' Yvonne said.

'I know. The old man let me in. He told me. What's she like?'

'She seems very sweet, Nick. And beautiful. Not striking, but sweetly beautiful.'

'Beauty is a matter of opinion. Was Mother worried?'

'You should have called. You know how dramatic Mother is. I really don't think she was worried, though.'

'I brought you some shells. They're over there,' he said. 'I wasn't sure whether you'd like them or not. You're not a collector of things, it seems.'

She was sitting on the edge of his bed and he was sitting up in the bed now drinking the coffee. He told her about the trip and she told him how hectic things had been around the house with the wedding and all.

'Should I bring Pat in to meet you?' she asked.

'Not now. Where's Mother?'

'Out with Sophia. Last minute shopping and arranging. The phone's been ringing and ringing.'

'Does Pat think I'm taking her to the wedding?' he asked her.

'No one said anything. But I told her you had made plans before you heard she was coming up.'

'Thanks, baby.'

'You're bringing Nora?'

'You know I am.'

'Did you call her?'

'No. I will in a while.'

'Oh Nick,' she said putting her hand on his bare deeply tanned shoulder, 'you seem so much better.'

'I didn't know anything was wrong with me.'

'Oh, I didn't mean that. It was just that you were so nervous before you left.'

He smiled. 'Would you get me some more coffee while I hop in the shower and shave?'

She took his cup and went away. He showered and shaved quickly and put on his sneakers and khaki pants and a T-shirt and came out and got his fresh cup of coffee and took it into the master bedroom and called Nora.

'Hello,' Nora said in that gracious, polite, sincere way that somehow did not seem a false or acquired way. 'Who's calling?'

'You don't know me, uh,' Nick said.

'Nickie. Where the hell have you been?'

'I'm sorry I didn't call. I had a couple chances when we first started the trip. Then I thought I'd call you from the islands. But we went way down in there and camped. And there weren't any phones or anything.'

'I understand,' she said sweetly, graciously. 'Did you have fun?'

'It was wonderful. I missed you,' he said.

'I missed you.'

'When can I see you?' he asked her. 'We got in late. I just got up.'

'You want to buy my lunch? I've appointments later in the day - my hair and nails.'

'The Drake in an hour. The Camellia Room.'

'Fine. I'll be at the bar if I beat you.'

'And I'll be at the bar if I beat you.'

He went back into his room to change. As he was slipping

on his gabardines Yvonne came in. 'You going somewhere?' 'The Drake.'

'Nora?' Yvonne asked. 'I think Mother wanted you to run some errands.'

'I won't be late.'

'Please, Nick. She was counting on you.'

'Don't worry, honey.'

'That was nice of you bringing me those shells.'

'I thought about you when I was looking for them,' he smiled.

'Thanks, Nick.'

'Come here,' he said. She came over and he put his arms around her. 'What's wrong with you, baby? You seem sad.'

She began to cry, softly, a whimpering little-girl cry.

'What's wrong?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I just feel sad, I guess. You look so good, Nick.'

'Why don't you come to lunch with us?'

'No. I promised Mom I'd wait for her,' she said still crying.

'And there's nothing in particular, wrong.'

'No,' she shook her head. 'I've just felt a cry coming on. For days now.'

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her eyes and she half-smiled half-cried up at him. She looked so mature, so striking: black-eyed, tall and maturely dark to seem such a child, he thought. To him, in his arms, she was like a feathery little bird that he was stroking, half bewildered yet half-lulled by his touch; and suddenly the great gentleness, the great tenderness that was in him, buried so deep in him that he never seemed to be able to let it loose, suddenly burst forth like a flash flood through an arroyo and Yvonne felt the sudden flood, gentle and tender, and felt too, practically all the warm comfort and security that she had felt the need for these last few almost unbearably lonely days.

'Thank you, Nick,' she said after a moment. 'You're so sweet sometimes. You remind me now of when you were a little boy.'

'You needed that cry,' he said.

'I feel better. I'd better go wash my face. I don't want Pat to see me like this.'

'Where is she?' he asked her.

'On the sun porch – reading and listening to the radio. She sang for us the other night. She has a beautiful voice. Opera, no less.'

'A trained voice?'

'The best voice teachers in New York. She's had quite a few offers – from opera, the stage, even the movies. But her father wouldn't let her take them.'

'He's not the same kind of Greek as Old Pete?' Nick asked.

'Like hell! he isn't,' she answered. 'Except he drinks like a fish. Like you. Only better.'

'You're hurting my feelings,' Nick said.

'You hurt *too much*, too easily,' she said. 'Don't let Nora hurt you, Nick – please,' she said with a quiver in her voice, her eyes still tear stained.

'That wasn't what you were crying about?' he asked seriously.

'Of course not, silly.' Nick couldn't tell whether she was lying or not.

'Was it?' he said sternly.

'Well – well, partly,' she said, turning her head and beginning to cry again and half running away towards the master bathroom where she slammed the door and he heard her lock it.

'Oh Jesus,' he half-murmured to himself. Then began to finish dressing. Then went downstairs and before going to the kitchen for his coffee went out on the porch.

Pat was there stretched out on the porch swing as Yvonne said she was. She was playing tunes from *Carousel* on the record player and reading a book of Eugene O'Neill's plays. When she heard him, or felt him standing there (he couldn't tell which), she sat up and he was half dumb struck when he saw how sweetly pretty she was with her loosely falling bangs and long streaked-from-the-sun blonde hair pulled tight with a comb in the back and a slightly turned up tanned nose, and about the most beautiful rose white yet slightly pink-from-the-sun skin that Nick had ever seen.

Still standing there half dumb struck, he looked at her legs in that invading way of his, then up to her breasts. She had on a low cut print cotton dress, tight at the waist but full skirted.

'I'm Nick,' he said, half awkwardly, still half dumb struck at meeting this sweet, child-like creature in his own house so early in the morning.

'I thought so,' she said. 'I'm Pat.' And extended her hand. He took it. She had long fingers and long nails but there was no polish on the nails and only a slight trace of lipstick on her mouth.

'You don't look like any Greek,' he said.

'I'm only half-Greek,' she said. 'Like you. My mother was German Irish.'

'I hope you're not as mixed up about that as I am,' he said in a kind voice.

'My mother died when I was three,' she said. 'You don't look so beat up,' she added forwardly.

'Who said I was beat up? Mother?'

Pat smiled her answer.

'How about some coffee?' he asked her.

'I've had mine. Let me fix you some.'

'You cook?'

'My Daddie wouldn't let anyone but me cook for him.' When she said 'Daddie' he discerned only the slightest trace of southern accent for the first time.

'I stopped by your house down in Atlanta. But you had left for up here already.'

'Sorry we didn't have a chance to entertain you,' she said sweetly. She really had a very sweet, very innocent appearance. I wonder if she's a virgin, he asked himself. She's only seventeen. Of course that doesn't make any difference these days. But I bet she's a virgin. I feel it.

'Come on,' she said moving forward, 'and we'll get you some coffee. Breakfast, too?' she asked. She took his hand as she came towards him which he really thought was quite forward in one so young and sweet and innocent.

'You don't look like a Greek either,' she said when they were in the kitchen. 'I'm not sure what you look like.'

Yvonne came down the back stairs.

'You've met,' she said to them. She was still red eyed.

'Obviously,' Nick said.

He was thumbing through the book of O'Neill plays Pat had been reading, sitting on the edge of the kitchen table.

'Well, do you want breakfast?' Pat asked.

'Oh, no,' he said. 'I mean I'm hungry but I've an appointment downtown.'

'Why don't you take Pat?' Yvonne said, being mischievous again.

'It's business,' Nick said. 'Besides, I won't be long. Then maybe we could all go to the beach?'

'I'd like that,' Pat said. Her back was to him as she stood at the toaster. Nick was staring at her legs again.

Yvonne admonished Nick with her eyes and a shake of her head, then came over and whispered: 'Don't you ever think about anything but that?'

Nick grinned and whispered back. 'You've got a warped mind, that's all. I appreciate beautiful things,' he whispered back.

'She's only seventeen, Nick.'

'You'd never know it now, would you?'

'You s.o.b.' Yvonne whispered back but unable to keep from giggling slightly.

They all sat down in the breakfast nook together and Nick had toast and coffee. They asked him about his fishing trip.

Almost reverently, he began to speak of the islands, of the solitude and beauty of creation that he had seen, speaking in a gentle, soft modulated voice, speaking so softly that both Yvonne and Pat had to strain to hear what he was saying.

It was hard for Pat to believe that she was hearing this from Nick. She had been in Chicago almost a week and had attended several of the wedding parties and everything she had heard about him was completely contradictory to the way he spoke, and the way you could feel him now. His simplicity of speech did not seem to matter. Nor did his continuous misuse and mispronunciation of words seem to count. Only that he projected, somehow, as if by some almost inaudible tone of spirit and appreciation for the solitude and beauty and order of this wilderness of nature that had affixed itself to him. He seemed to speak above them, yet to them, yet not down to them, and there was no trace of inarticulateness as if what he spoke he understood completely and that from his understanding they understood, too, some way.

To Pat it all seemed so ancient and foreign and alien to

hear the voice, the feeling in the voice of the almost, she thought, Neanderthal looking head that rested on the hugely veined huge neck and the large protruding forehead and the scarred face. The candour, the purity, the seeming serenity that seemed to have so suddenly extended from him like the rays of some invisible spectrum, a spectrum of an awareness, it seemed to her an awareness of a different maybe even higher world. She went to church but she was not religious.

She sat there transfixed. Yvonne seemed mesmerized. She had never heard Nick speak like this. Yvonne was very religious at times (twice when she was younger she had had visions, she thought) and she wondered for a moment if Nick had been 'called.' And, too, she felt like crying again but it was another kind of cry than the one she had just had; a crying of not wanting it to end, not wanting him to change from this way that he was now.

Suddenly it was over. Nick took a sip of coffee. The coffee was cold. He did not know exactly what he had told them about his trip but suddenly he felt there had been a time passage of which he had not been aware. Yvonne said she would get him more coffee but he looked at his watch and said no. He had been sitting there over half an hour and realized he would be late meeting Nora.

'I have to go,' he said lazily, sleepily, as if he had just been relieved of a tension of a sort and was relieved tired. 'Jesus, I'm tired. It must have been the goddamn trip.'

'Nick, watch your language,' Yvonne said. The sudden sardonic way he spoke suddenly angered his sister, as if somehow Nick had suckered her in then slapped her.

'Oh,' he said. 'Sorry, Pat. You'll get used to it if you're around me.'

'Damn it, Nick,' Yvonne said, 'you can watch you language a little. It won't kill you.'

He was lighting a cigarette. 'I'll be back in a while. We'll go to the beach. Or I'll meet you there. If you're not home when I get back I'll meet you there,' he said in that half-sardonic way of his, then got up. 'You're pretty,' he said to Pat looking at her in that invading way. Pat, obviously embarrassed, looked at Yvonne and Nick turned grinning sardonically and left.

Oddly, as Nick drove downtown to the Drake for his luncheon date he was not thinking about Nora. The traffic was rather heavy and he was going to be considerably late but did not seem concerned. He was driving slowly and was thinking that for the first time in his life he had really explored a part of America. He had, he felt, in a sense defied an American concept in exploring rather than exploiting and he liked what he had seen and learned and felt of the land. It made him feel that somehow he knew what the older America was like and in the knowing of this it added perspective to his observations of the land and the people as they now were. Times *had* changed. The goal of the older world was achievement and not adjustment. Man alone measured himself in the older world, it seemed to him, while now it was the plurality of men, the group, that measured what conformity was.

Nora was at the bar. They kissed and then she moved away a little. 'You're black as an Indian. You look wonderful, Nick.'

'You look wonderful,' he said. 'I've missed you.'

'I missed you,' she smiled.

'I'm glad you didn't wear a hat,' he said. 'I don't like hats on women.'

'I never wear a hat,' she smiled and he ordered a scotch on the rocks.

'What was it like?' she asked him.

'Good. It was strange being in the wilderness again and not worrying that someone was behind every tree waiting to take a shot at you. And not seeing any aeroplanes. And to fish. There's a beautiful beach down in the islands. I want to take you to that beach some time. You're not in a hurry, are you?'

'Yes. But only because you're late. I thought you said you were never late.'

'I'm hardly ever late,' he said. 'We can order from here. That way we can have an extra drink. What about tonight?'

'I'm sorry, Nick. I didn't know when you were coming back. I've an old school friend staying with me for a few days. We're calling on another friend tonight.'

'Tomorrow night?'

'Fine,' she smiled.

'Then we'll warm up for the wedding tomorrow night. The wedding's day after tomorrow.'

'I didn't realize that,' she said. She was wondering suddenly if Old Pete Stratton would recognize her and what he would do if he did. 'I've never been to a Greek wedding. But I've heard about them.'

'Everybody gets drunk in the end.'

'Then I'll get drunk, too,' she said.

'Not too drunk.'

'No. Nice drunk.'

'Yes, you can get nice drunk,' he said. 'Me, I don't know what kind of drunk I'm going to get. On leave, in the Army, I got pretty bad drunks sometimes.'

'I believe that,' she said. She spoke graciously, looking at him with that rich well-bred look of no flirtatiousness, no sexualness, looking extremely rich in the simple white cotton dress and spectators, with the diamond wrist watch on the richly red manicured nails and the large cocktail ring and the hair that now he knew was combed but to appear carelessly combed; cropped, feather cut, metallic blue it seemed now in the dark of the Camellia Bar. She really made quite a picture in the extremely rich looking room with its expensive wallpaper of camellias and its old-fashioned crystal chandelier.

During lunch he was very quiet. Almost placid, she thought. And he had not, as she had expected him to, even tried to get her to call off her appointment for this afternoon. Certainly, she told herself, he was feeling well. He never looked better, healthier. He probably, she thought, just whored himself out those two days he spent in Palm Beach, recuperating on the trip back. She had had enough experience with men to know that anyone who packed as much tension as he had to get it out one way or another. Fishing, working at his fishing, tiring himself in the hot summer sun of Florida, he wouldn't be too prone to go whoring. But after that, with two whole days in Palm Beach? Alone?

'What did you do in Palm Beach?' she asked him.

'Not much. Swam a lot. Played tennis. The second day I went fishing in the bay,' he said.

'Oh,' she said.

'What have you been doing?' he asked her.

'Not much,' she said. 'I've been to the beach a lot. And read.'

What was wrong with him, she wondered? Where was that tension, that wiredness that he always seemed to exude? He had never been able to hide that. And it did not just go away. Not in ten or twelve days it didn't just go away.

'What will you do today?' she asked him.

'Go to the beach, I suppose. Or run some errands. I understand things are pretty hectic around the house because of the wedding. They asked me to help if I would. Besides, we have company. A house guest.'

'Relatives?'

'No. Friends of the family,' he said. 'A young girl from Atlanta. Staying with Yvonne.'

He was thinking now that this whole idea of having lunch with her was foolish. It had taken him over forty-five minutes to get here and it would take him at least that long to get back and the lunch and drinks would cost at least twenty bucks. It was really very foolish. Why hadn't he just called her up and told her he was coming down to her apartment? Why?

You know damn well why. Because you just don't call up a woman in this day and age and say let's go to bed. It wasn't done. It was not in vogue. There were certain things that you went through, and she went through, and when you had both performed all the secret, unmentionable rites of this twentieth century deity to the other's satisfaction, of course, then you went to bed. The whole thing, this business of lunch, her so close and so formal, suddenly made him feel very uncomfortable and the two drinks had made him feel quite sluggish. He ordered another hoping it would help snap him out of this lethargic state.

'What will you wear to the wedding?' he asked.

'I don't know. I'll let you know.'

'Tomorrow night?' he asked.

'Yes. I won't be seeing you until then. Will I?' she asked. He thought he noted the slightest trace of invitation in her voice but he wasn't sure. The fact of the matter was she had an appointment. When she had an appointment she kept her appointment.

And at the very same time, she was seriously considering

excusing herself to go to the phone to change her appointment to have her hair and nails done. Then she could spend the afternoon with Nick. Perhaps on the beach. Then they could go up to the apartment, perhaps go out to dinner.

'I guess you're in a hurry,' he said.

'Oh!' She looked at her watch. 'I am a little late,' she said. He called for the check.

'Can I drop you?' he asked her.

'I can take a cab. It would be out of your way. Will you call later?'

'Of course.'

'I really don't want to go to that dinner. I might be able to get out of it,' she said. She suddenly realized that she had become quite nervous. Under the table she was rubbing the two fingers of her right hand against her thumb and, catching herself in this nervous action, calculatingly fought to control herself. 'Nick,' she said almost uncontrollably, saying it almost before she knew she was saying it. 'Nick, could I have one more quick drink before we go? I'm afraid I don't feel too well.'

'Of course. What's wrong?' he asked concernedly.

'I don't know,' she said feeling that familiar nameless fear. 'I think I might be about to start my period. I'm so irregular, you know,' she lied, not knowing why she had lied. She had just finished her period three days before. 'I'll drink it quickly. I really must hurry,' she said.

He ordered and the drink came. She took a small pill from her purse and took it with the drink. He asked her what it was and she said she didn't know, something her doctor had prescribed to alleviate the tensions that always accompanied her period. He was suddenly very concerned, wishing that he could do something for her. He would, he knew, probably have been very awkward discussing the word 'period' with any one except her. But she was so frank, so natural about it.

She finished her drink quickly and asked him if he would mind driving her as far as Randolph and Michigan, which was about a mile downtown. He drove her, and dropped her at the corner, and made a U-turn and got flagged down by the policeman on the corner but on finding out he had just returned from the service the policeman said he would let him go this time.

It had really been some day, he thought, driving north fast and not trying to hide his own irate feelings. But what in the hell was the use in needlessly frustrating himself? Lunch! She said 'Lunch' and you said 'Yes' before you knew what was happening. Why didn't you just say: 'I'm home. I'm coming up.' In Evanston he got a ticket for speeding.

When he got home the maid said there had been two calls from his father and that he was to call him right away at the office. His mother had not as yet come home and, the maid said, Yvonne and Pat had gone to the beach.

He called Old Pete.

'How you doing, son?' Old Pete asked tiredly. 'I've been trying to get you.'

'I had an appointment,' Nick said.

'I thought you were going to stay around the house and help your mother.'

'Mother's out,' he said.

'Well, she coulda needed you.'

'I had a business appointment.'

'Yeah. What kind of business?'

'I was looking into that coin-operated business. I told you about that.'

'Yeah. That's a tough business, son. Lots of racketeers in that business.'

'Well, I'm just looking into it,' he said. 'There something you want?'

'I hear you're going to the beach with the girls.'

'I planned to. For a while anyhow. It's getting late.'

'Well, I thought it would be kind of nice for you to take Pat to dinner. I'm taking her father down to Greektown for a little dinner, then we're going to play a little cards,' he said. 'It's fine with her father.'

'Don't you want me to take Yvonne, too?'

'Well, I think it would be nice if you took Yvonne. But somebody ought to be there to help your mother. So why don't you just take the girl. Some place nice. She's never been out with a boy before.'

'Well, that costs money, you know,' Nick said. 'And I was going to try and hang on to what I got left in case I find something I want to go into.'

'You don't worry about the money. I owe her father lots of favours. I take care of whatever you spend. And a little more, besides. All right?'

'All right,' Nick said. 'She's a very pretty little thing,' Nick said in that half sardonic way of his.

'No monkey business, son', Old Pete said in a new resolute voice, a starch meaning voice. 'I'll kill you you lay one dirty hand on that girl,' he said.

'I'm not out for any girls. Not that young,' Nick said believably, but grinning to himself nevertheless.

'I mean it,' Old Pete said. 'You take her some place nice. But get home early. One o'clock the latest.'

'I'll get home,' he said. 'Where you going to play poker?'

'I'm not sure,' Old Pete said. 'We decide that at dinner.'

'Well, have a good time,' Nick said knowing damn well the game would be at the Lake Hotel and there would be women. A good old Roman debauchery, Greek style he thought. 'I think I'll take Pat to the Lake,' Nick said. 'That's a nice room, that Rose Room.'

'Well, do as you please. But don't you think you ought to take her some place where the younger people go?' he said cagily. 'Like the Sherman. They got a jazz band at the Sherman. She'd probably like that. You know, son, when you entertain a guest you got to consider them.'

'I'll see. I'll ask her. But I think I'll take her to the Lake. At least for a cocktail.' Nick was grinning widely to himself now.

'No cocktails for her. Nothing but a glass of wine for her. You hear me? Her father told me she didn't drink any cocktails. And you watch your own drinking. Hear?' Old Pete said. Old Pete was thinking already that he had better call up Lou Duck right away and get the card game switched from the Lake to the Delaware House.

'All right, Dad,' Nick said. 'Don't worry.'

'That's a boy,' Old Pete said. 'When you talk like that you make me feel good. But I worry about you, son. I'll always worry about you. Your mother. Your sister. You're all I've got, ALL,' he said. And Nick knew he was about to start to cry.

'Goodbye, Dad,' Nick said.

'Goodbye, son,' Old Pete said plaintively. 'Goodbye,' he added once more dramatically.

Nick hung up. The minute he hung up he knew for some reason which he could not quite discern that he would ply that girl with liquor and do everything in his power to make her. And he had a feeling he would. The strange thing was that it had nothing to do with the girl.

He never really intended taking her to the Lake Hotel. There would be no reason to take her there. First, he was quite sure that by now they would be making arrangements to have the card game transferred to some other hotel. In the second place, there was a chance Nora and her visiting girl friend from St Mary's, living only a few blocks away, might stop by the bar for a drink. He was really very pleased with himself thinking of all the inconvenience he must have caused everyone by merely saying he was going to the Lake to have a drink. Certainly it was going to take some arranging and under-the-table dealing to get another hotel suite this late in the day in these times. And they must have had a hell of a time locating all the call broads in the middle of the afternoon to inform them that they had changed the location of their social.

On this he went out into the kitchen and had himself a drink and no longer feeling sluggish went upstairs and put on his swim suit and very pleased with himself drove over to the beach and joined Yvonne and Pat.

'Ellen just left,' Yvonne said as he joined them on their beach towel. 'She invited us over to her house for a drink. All of us.'

'When?'

'Before dinner. Did you talk to Dad?' she asked him.

'Yes.'

'What are you so happy about?' Yvonne asked.

'You're something,' he answered. 'You're suspicious if I'm happy. Suspicious if I'm sad. I just feel good. And I was thinking of asking Pat out to dinner,' he said looking over at her and then quickly deciding she had more breast than he had first thought she had, seeing the way she filled out her bathing suit.

Pat was aware of the way he was looking.

'My father said it would be all right if I went out with

you,' Pat said expertly, casually hiding a sudden tingling excitement.

'Fine,' Nick said. 'I wish you could come along, baby,' he said to Yvonne.

'Don't lie to me, Nick.'

'I asked Dad if you could come. Ask him if I didn't.'

'Sure,' Yvonne said. 'How's Nora?'

'I didn't see Nora,' he said. 'I was down looking at some coinoperated machines.'

Yvonne smiled knowingly, picking up a handful of sand and letting it sift through her fingers.

When they got home there was a message that Mary would be a little late. Nick told Pat to hurry and get dressed, hoping to get out of the house before his mother arrived home. Undoubtedly, he deduced, in the shower, Yvonne would give Pat enough of a lecture on how to conduct herself with him. And he had the feeling that if he saw his mother she would undoubtedly give him a lecture on the virtue of their house guest. It would have been too much. One lecture from Old Pete and those goddamn side remarks by Yvonne were enough for one day. It did not occur to him that he hadn't seen his mother in over two weeks.

Actually while Nick was taking his shower and Pat was dressing Yvonne *was* lecturing to her. Of course Yvonne *did* not realize what an extreme pleasure she was realizing for herself by playing the mother protector and moralist and woman-of-the-world to the sheltered Pat. It really made Yvonne feel very wise, very mature. She was carried away by her own wisdom on the sanctity and virtue and chastity of womanhood and how, by God, when she went to a man she was going clean, a virgin. It wasn't that she was a prig, she told Pat, but on the subject of marriage and sex there were certain old-fashioned ideas that modern women did not adhere to much to their later unhappiness.

What Yvonne did not realize was that though Pat seemed to be listening to her, she wasn't listening at all. The fact of the matter was that Pat could not have possibly been listening as she was in that dream state, that crushing state of reverie and fantasy that accompanies first love. She nodded to Yvonne occasionally and occasionally said something to

her in the way of polite reply but to her the whole scene of dressing to go out with him struck her with a visionary appeal, as if the entire scene of her and Yvonne there in the room were set upon a stage upon which the world viewed. Being in love was more, even, than she had experienced it in the poetry and novels she had read. She was experiencing it all, even the tragic. She had a premonition of impending tragedy. You did not love like this and have it exist on and on. She knew that. And it seemed acceptable to her. She would not reject the tragic consequences of love, she would not reject anything in order that this blissful dream-like state continued on. 'Tis better to have loved and lost' she even quoted to herself dramatically.

She had a very difficult time getting dressed. She couldn't find a proper slip and spilled her perfume and couldn't find the earrings she wanted. Of course all this caused Yvonne to believe that her lecture was having a proper effect, and that even though she had instilled, obviously, the fear of God in this sheltered child that was about to go out alone with a lying, conniving, over-sexed (even if he was her brother. The war had ruined him and was there any hope for him?) it was better that she instil the fear of God in her, be honest with her regarding Nick. She didn't want it on her conscience that this sheltered girl's life was ruined right under her very eyes when she, Yvonne, had the intelligence and foresight and, by God, the courage to honestly prevent it. It wasn't very easy. And, she told herself, if Nick had any sense of decency at all she wouldn't be forced to resort to such drastic measures. God knew it wasn't easy on her.

It was really quite a scene. Pat attempted to make herself up and Yvonne made her cleanse her face and begin all over. And also cagily talked her into using some of her own perfume which was not quite as endearing as Pat's. By the time Pat was ready to leave she looked very sweet, very young and very innocent and Yvonne couldn't help herself but to call Nick aside before they left and inform him once again that Pat was only seventeen and that he was twenty-three and that if he did anything to that sweet and innocent little girl it would constitute statutory rape in the state of Illinois. Yvonne was very nervous when they left and went upstairs

and had herself another cry. It was the third time that day she had cried, each time for a different reason.

Looking down at Pat as they drove away Nick sensed immediately her adoration. She could not hide it and it made him feel quite guilty thinking the way he had been thinking about her. She was really so sweet and young and innocent it would be almost criminal to make a pass at her, he thought. But just as he thought it she moved over on the seat so that she was snug close to him and put her hand on his arm. He was thrown slightly off balance. It was really kind of pitiful, he thought, and suggested they go right out to Los Caballeros and get themselves a drink. It wasn't far, he told her, and they could decide from there where they would go.

Feeling very guilty over his thoughts about her, and thwarted for the second time this day, he decided when they got there that he would order a martini. Then, while Louis waited poised and patient and studying this new acquisition of Nick's, Nick asked her, feeling a sudden flood of nobleness and gallantry winging through him, if she would like a little sherry, he understood she took a little wine. Instead of answering she asked him what he was going to have and he said a martini and she said she wanted one too. So he ordered two martinis, very dry, to be served in old fashioned glasses with ice, a new presentation of martinis that Louis himself had thought up and which was becoming quite a popular drink with steady clientele.

He could tell she didn't like the martini but sipped on it looking up at him with that childish, school-girlish adoration that still made him feel guilty. He excused himself and went to call Nora. She wasn't in and hadn't been in, her answering service said, which made him slightly frustrated. Why was she so goddamn insistent upon my calling her when she wasn't even going home?

Nick had three martinis while she had her one and they decided to go to the Sherman. Tommy Dorsey's band was there and she was a great admirer of Tommy Dorsey, she said, in a slightly happy little way that made Nick realize that she had felt the lone martini. Christ, he said to himself, it's probably the first hard liquor she's ever had! He'd better feed her soon. He did not realize that the three martinis that

he had drunk had had quite an effect on him. He just did not drink martinis well when he was frustrated or thwarted or had had too much sun and today he was frustrated and thwarted and had the sun, all three, so that the martinis had quite an effect (he hadn't eaten a damn thing at lunch with Nora) and suddenly he wondered if, really, she was so sweet and young and innocent, she certainly didn't act it the way she moved over to him in the car. You know you can't hold them down, he said to himself. You hold them down and they get loose and they run amuck. That was natural.

They went out to the car and he kissed her long and tenderly, then long and hard. It was the first time she had ever been kissed, truly, but Nick would never have believed that. Then suddenly Nick thought about what Yvonne said about it being statutory rape to go to bed with a seventeen-year-old in Illinois. He started the car wondering how in the hell Yvonne would know that. They drove down to the Inn. They had another martini. She was really very gaily drunk from the other martini but the dinner sobered him considerably and he was concerned about whether or not she was innocent and sheltered like everyone said.

You just couldn't tell about a woman. Take Nora for example. How could a man look at Nora and the rich way she looked today and possibly believe what she was like in bed? He excused himself and while in the men's room called her again and was again frustrated when her answering service said she still hadn't come in. Christ, it was almost eleven o'clock. Certainly she had to go home to change. What a hell of a day this had been. Two policemen had stopped him, and he had gotten one ticket, and it cost him twenty dollars for a lunch that only frustrated him, and now he was out with a child he didn't know what to do with.

He danced with her and she wanted a Cuba Libre after dinner. She sat very close to him looking at him with a hazy but open admiration that frightened him in a way. He began to drink scotch like hell and put his hand on her leg under the booth table and pulled up her skirt and felt the young smooth-skinned thigh and she did not resist. He said they should go and she said that would be fine.

He began to drive north. He decided they would go by Los Caballeros for one more drink, then he figured he'd drive

out to the Forest Preserve where he went with Ellen. It was one of those days all right. Near the Edgewater Beach the car stalled and the prowl car sent a tow wagon. They towed him into a station on Foster Avenue. The fuel line was clogged, they couldn't find where. There wasn't anything he could do but take a cab. It was almost twelve thirty and he knew his mother and Yvonne would be asleep and knew Old Pete wouldn't be home until late, probably. He figured he could lock the front door and they could go in the library. Why not? What difference did it make where?

They took a cab. It was a very long ride in the cab. When they got home he took her into the study and they lay down on the couch. He tried everything that he knew and she would let him do everything but somehow she could not make herself go all the way as bad as she wanted to. He could feel how much she wanted to, and he plied her with one more drink and then he heard the front door bell ring and he sent her up the back stairs and went and let Old Pete in.

She was shaking all over when she got upstairs. She was so happy Yvonne was asleep. She was almost sure that after that last drink she would have been able to do it with him. She was not sure whether she was glad she hadn't or sorry that she hadn't let him. God knows she wanted him, and she thought what a wonderful thing it was to want to too. She had a very difficult time going to sleep. And the next morning she waited until she was sure that he had left the house before she came downstairs. In the bathroom, in the morning, she cried because she wasn't going to the wedding with him and wondered what kind of woman it was that he was bringing.

Chapter Twenty Five

NICK was up early the next day. When he came down Old Pete and Mary were already in the breakfast nook having coffee. Mary got up and embraced Nick.

'Son, Nick, we've missed you so,' she said putting her arms

around him. He embraced his mother. 'Your father was just saying how much good he thought the trip did you.'

'Yeah,' Old Pete said from his sitting position. 'I wish I could have made that trip. God knows I needed it.'

'You'll make one together soon,' Mary said. 'Real soon,' Mary said. 'Real soon, won't you, Nick?'

'Of course we will, Mother.'

'Well, did you have a nice time last night?' Old Pete asked.

'She's a beautiful girl isn't she, Nickie?' his mother questioned.

'Yes. Very pretty. We had a very nice time. But the car broke down,' Nick said sitting down and pouring himself some coffee while his mother told the maid to make his breakfast. 'I had to take a cab all the way from Foster Avenue. Of course if I had been alone I would have taken a train. But, she being your friend's daughter and you owing her father so many favours, I thought it would only be right if I took a cab,' Nick said pleasantly.

'I'm glad you did,' Old Pete said. 'I know it must of cost like hell but I'm glad you did.'

'Yeah, in fact you owe me around fifty dollars,' Nick said. 'Roughly, fifty dollars.'

'Fifty dollars!' Old Pete said. 'Fifty dollars,' he practically shouted. 'How could you possible spend fifty dollars?'

'Well, dinner at the Sherman came to over thirty dollars alone,' Nick said soberly. 'Then, of course, there was the tip. You said the girl only took a little wine. So I ordered champagne with the dinner. The champagne cost eleven or twelve dollars alone. I thought I should have ordered it. After all, this was the first time she'd ever been out on a date. I thought *we'd* make it as nice as possible for her.'

'I'm glad you did it,' Old Pete said. 'Goddamn it. I'm glad you did it,' he said emphatically. 'Fifty or no fifty.'

'You want to give it to me now?' Nick asked. 'I'm short.'

'You got plenty of money in the bank,' Old Pete said. 'How can you be short?'

'Short on cash. That's all.'

'Give him the money as long as you promised,' Mary said.

'I'll bring you a cheque tonight,' Old Pete said. 'You kind of like that girl, uh?' Even Old Pete could not hide his apparent anxiety waiting for Nick's answer.

'You couldn't help but like a sweet young girl like Pat. No boy could,' Mary said.

'I was asking Nick, Mother,' Old Pete said, obviously bothered by Mary's intrusion.

'I like her very much. She's very intelligent. And pretty. It's amazing how much she knows seeing she's never been to school.'

'Yeah,' Old Pete said. 'Well, you know why, don't you, son? You know why, don't you? The almighty dollar, that's why. Her father bought her the best teachers there were. And, by God, if I'd had the money to spare I'd done the same for you and Yvonne. After I saw what *tututurs*, or whatever you call them, did for that girl. That girl shows respect. She listens. Yeah, by God, if I'd had his kind of money that is what you and Yvonne would have had if that's what it does for you. That girl's going to make some man a hell of a wife, I tell you that. And Old John's gotta go some day. He sure does. And whoever marries that girl is going to be set,' he said. Then, again, but this time pounding the table, said, 'SET.'

'I sure wish I hadn't made other arrangements for the wedding,' Nick said. 'But after the wedding, I'll be taking her out again.'

'I told you you should have waited until you met this girl,' Old Pete said, 'before making arrangements for the wedding.' It was really very difficult for Old Pete to control himself thinking that Nick was taking someone else besides Pat to the wedding tomorrow. And a total stranger besides. It really put him in a very embarrassing position with her father. I wonder, Old Pete said to himself, if he tried some funny business with her and got away with it. The son-of-a-bitch, if I find out he did I'd hit him right in the head. I swear I'd hit him right in the head.

'What time did you leave the Inn?' Old Pete asked casually.

'A little after twelve. We were home a little after one-thirty because of the car trouble. About fifteen minutes before you came home.'

'I heard them come in,' Mary lied, 'right before you.'

Well, Old Pete said to himself, that didn't give them much

time. Besides it was their *first* night out together. And she was no tramp.

'I gotta go,' Old Pete said.

'You driving?' Nick asked. 'I have to go to Foster and see about the car. Then I'll be home, Mother, if you need any help.'

'I don't think I'll need you today, Nick. You know what an organizer I am. Of course there'll be the family dinner here, tonight. For the bride and groom. You know about that, don't you?'

'No. I didn't know about it,' Nick said, knowing that this dinner wasn't one he could very well get out of and thinking that he would have to change his date with Nora until later.

'Come on, son, we'll take the train together. You can get off at Foster and grab a bus down to near Sheridan. Come on. It's been a long time since we took the train together.'

'That's the way I like to see father and son,' Mary said.

'All right, Dad,' Nick said. 'I'll hurry and finish eating.'

'Now don't you rush, Nick,' Mary said. 'After all you've been through you should be careful of *what* and *how* you eat.'

On the train, Old Pete talked quite a bit about business and about how much the wedding was going to cost him and how he hoped that as soon as all this disruption the wedding had caused was over that Nick would start down at the office. Really, Old Pete needed him very bad. And strictly, confidentially, he was real worried about his partners the Stratos brothers. He also told Nick, strictly confidentially, that he had had lunch with Pierro a few days before and he wouldn't be surprised if Pierro wasn't going to ask Marci Preston to marry him, which came as quite a surprise to Nick. In fact, Old Pete said, Marci was the only outsider, outside of Pat of course, who was coming to the family dinner for the bride and groom tonight. Then Old Pete expressed considerable concern about the groom, Sophia's husband to be. He, Old Pete, had had a long talk with him and the fellow had some crazy ideas about going into politics in Baltimore. 'Jesus,' Old Pete said, 'I can understand a man going into politics after he's established himself. You get the right job then and you could become rich in a few years. But, for Christ's sake, he hadn't even begun to practice as yet.

What was the use him going to Harvard all those years just to try and get some small time political job. I tell you, Nick, the war has made this younger generation crazy. Ca-ra-zy.'

Nick got off at Foster. He had to wait over an hour for the car, then drove home. He called Nora and told her that he would be tied up until late because of the family dinner for the bride and groom, would she mind if they made it later that night. Say around eleven-thirty or twelve. She said she wasn't feeling too well anyhow and though they'd best call the whole thing off; she didn't want to stay up too late and not look nice for him for the wedding. She was very logical, and very sweet, and very sincere on the phone and there wasn't very much he could do except agree with her.

The wedding was set for four at the Saint James Greek Orthodox Church, the bishop himself presiding. The house was bustling when he awoke and he went down and fixed himself some toast and coffee. The phone rang continuously and Mary was trying to get Sophia organized enough so that they could get down to their suite at the Edgewater, which was not far from the church, and where Sophia would dress. It was a very warm day and when Nick caught his mother between phone calls he asked her if there was anything he could do. She said the best thing he could do would be to get out of the house, preparing the bride was woman's work, which was fine with him. He went to the beach. As he came down the walk to the beach he noticed Ellen sitting with several other girls and skirted around them and went far up the beach swimming and walking. When he came back she was gone and he went home. It was after three and there was no one there except the maid. It felt strange and peaceful in the house all alone. The trees stood tall around the big house and the house was cool from the shade and after the beach. He sat down by the big stone fireplace in his swimming trunks marvelling at how really peaceful it seemed here in his own home alone. Then he decided he had better start to get dressed to go pick up Nora. He gave her a call intending to tell her to be sure and be ready on time, that though the invitations said four the wedding would start no later than four fifteen.

'Nick,' she said over the phone in that endearing way she

had. 'Would you mind if I didn't go to the church with you? I've been thinking about it. I don't know your family. Or any of those people for that matter, and I'm afraid I'd feel rather uncomfortable.'

'You're really welcome, Nora. I've been telling my family all about you.'

'Please, Nick,' she asked. 'You know I get so nervous sometimes. You can pick me up right after the ceremony. I'll be much better company if you pick me up afterwards. I do want us to have lots of fun tonight.'

Nick understood. After all, she wasn't Greek, didn't understand Greek, didn't know anyone (he thought) outside himself who would be there. Besides, maybe she didn't want to go into an Orthodox church. Lots of Catholics were that way about going into another church. 'Sure, Nora, I understand.'

'The orchid's beautiful, Nick. I think it's the most beautiful flower I've ever had.' He noticed the relief in her voice.

'I'll be there around five-thirty then. I'm sorry you're not coming. But I do understand.'

'I knew you would, Nick. I'll see you then.'

'You feel all right?'

'Fine. And you?'

'I'll show you how I feel, later.'

'I'll like that, Nick. I'll like that very much. I've missed you, Nick,' she said and there was that strange turbulence in her voice that made his breathing come suddenly heavier and he felt flesh bumps on his arms.

They said goodbye and he stood there for a moment next to the telephone thinking about her, about the way she was.

He dressed and went down to the church. It was very warm in the church and he managed to get a seat at the very end of the pew on the bride's side, right near a side door. The church was full of incense and very crowded. Everyone, almost three hundred and fifty, who had been invited to the church were invited to the reception at the Grand Ballroom of the Edgewater Beach Hotel.

The choir came in first all dressed in black and holding white candles; then came the four young novices in their black robes holding larger candles; then came four priests robed in white and gold brocade spraying incense, and fol-

lowing them at a respectable distance came the tall bearded bishop with his jewelled crown and his tall staff, stately, well over six feet, wide shouldered, with bright sweet eyes and a rough hewn, yet kindly, face, chanting as he proceeded up the aisle. Then the chorus began to chant a Greek chant and then those in the procession took their proper places on the altar and after a few minutes' wait, during which one of the older guests fainted (undoubtedly due to the added heat caused by the candles) came Old Pete proudly in his morning suit with the neat little pearl in the centre of his grey-black cravat, looking for all the world like some distinguished banker, the bride on his arm, and misty eyed with pride and joy and the fact that he, a once penniless immigrant, was giving such a wedding as this.

Nick thought the ceremony was beautiful as he had always thought all Greek Orthodox wedding ceremonies were. It was not a solemn ceremony like most. The bridal party danced around the bishop in a dance of joy and happiness, the bride and groom holding olive leaves over each other's heads. Mary cried continuously all during the ceremony as did Pierro's and Sophia's old bent-from-arthritis mother whom Mary had dressed immaculately and dignifiedly in a simple grey long dress with a grey hat to match. It was the first time, Nick remembered, since her husband had died that he had seen her dressed in anything but black. God, he thought, that was over fifteen years ago at least.

Nick looked around and saw that quite a few of the older Greeks were crying, as was the custom, and once caught Pat's eye and she smiled that sweet innocent smile at him and he smiled back feeling again a fatherly sort of compassion towards her. Right before the ceremony ended he slipped out the side door and went to his car and started for Nora's. He wondered if he could get his gabardines pressed quickly somewhere before they went to the reception.

Nora was all made up but not dressed when he got there. He was sticky, sweaty, and only kissed her lightly clean and fresh as she was. She called the doorman to come quick and get his suit and took off his major's leaves and branch insignia while he showered. Then she put on her iron and pressed his shirt.

Her pressing his shirt suddenly gave him that very homey,

married feeling he had had here the first time they had ever had breakfast together, the first time he had ever had the feeling. He looked up at the oil painting of her on the wall, wondering again what was wrong with it, what there was that seemed distorted to him.

'Put this board away, will you, Nick?' she said, very wifely, making him feel homier still. 'I'll make you a drink. What'll it be?'

'Gin and anything.'

'I think I'll drink gin, too. I had a martini already.'

'I thought you had a drink,' he said, putting the ironing board into the closet. 'I mean I thought I smelled it. Feeling better?'

'Much.'

'Come here and let me kiss you.'

'That wasn't very much of a kiss you gave me when you came in,' she smiled.

'I was dirty.'

'I liked the way you smelled.'

'I forgot who you were,' he said by way of compliment.

'So quickly?'

'If you knew what I thought about sometimes.'

'I wish I did know,' she said.

'I think we ought to be late for the reception.'

'It's your party, Nickie. I'm in no hurry.' She brought his drink over and handed it to him and reached up and kissed him on the ear. He put his arm around her and led her towards the bedroom.

The receiving line was still intact when they arrived at the Edgewater. As they went down the line Nick introduced Nora. Then, suddenly, Old Pete saw her. Instantly he went partially grey and Nora knew the Old Man had recognized her as she had thought he would. Nick wondered what was wrong with his father. Wondered if he was angry because Nick was so late.

'Sorry I'm late, Dad,' Nick said as he shook hands and kissed his father as was the custom, 'but Nora couldn't make the wedding and I had to go down and pick her up after church.'

Old Pete's hand shook but he forced an awkward smile which Nick knew was a forced smile.

'I'll see *you* later,' Old Pete whispered to Nick and turned and half-smiled at Nora, thinking what an ass Nick was making out of him, his own son bringing a common low whore to his own father's wedding reception, about the most elegant wedding reception ever thrown by any Greek in America. Jesus, what would Lou Duck think when he saw her with Nick? Lou had been with her a lot. Christ, Nick couldn't be that goddamn dumb not to know she wasn't a common whore! Jesus Christ, if this ever gets out, he thought smiling and shaking hands with someone, I'll be the laughing stock of the town. And how the hell I'm gonna tell him I know she's a whore?

You don't suppose she told Nick about me? he asked himself. He was sweating profusely now and turned to Mary and said he would be back in a minute all this standing and shaking of hands had made him a little shaky. Mary could see he was grey and told him to get himself a brandy, she would carry on. Jesus, Old Pete said to himself, Jesus but Nick wouldn't do that deliberately. As he started towards the bar he noticed Nick and Nora standing and talking with the bishop. Christ, Old Pete said to himself, Christ, Lord God, what did I ever do to deserve this? Every time that kid gets around something he blows it up, ruins it! Certainly he couldn't possibly know she was a cheap common call broad and then take her over and introduce her to the bishop. Even Nick wouldn't do *that*, would he? Not unless, Oh God, Oh Lord God, you don't suppose some old woman put the evil eye on him when he was fighting in Greece. There must be a lot of people around my home town envy my success. In spite of what I've done for them, that's the way people were.

Old Pete slipped out of the receiving line and went up to the bar with everyone slapping him on the back and congratulating him and telling him that the bride and groom were 'just about the most beautiful, handsomest couple they had ever seen' and 'you really went all out this time, Pete.' He ordered a brandy and when he turned around with it in his hand about to gulp it Nick and Nora and the bishop were standing right behind him. Nora was talking to the

bishop about a Saint Mary's priest she had known who was a mutual friend of the bishop's (they had taken a theology course together at Columbia in New York some years before).

'Have a drink with us, Dad,' Nick said respectfully.

'I have not seen your son in years,' the huge bishop said smiling, speaking in a soft, kindly voice. 'He has grown. And his lady and I have a mutual friend. You will join us. I would like to propose a toast to the happiness of you and yours. I must do that. I have given you all the other kind of blessings that I can give.'

Old Pete was shaking, knowing he was stuck, and for a second not knowing what to do, then reverently he leaned over and took the bishop's hand and kissed his ring and, as he raised back up, his eyes darted around the room suspiciously, wondering if Lou Duck or Mike Swanson or Baby-Carriage (all, he suddenly remembered, who had Nora's number) wondering if any of them were watching.

Nick was thinking that maybe the heat and the excitement of the wedding were too much for Old Pete. Then the bishop put a friendly arm around Old Pete and they all moved forward to the bar, Old Pete trying very hard to avoid Nora's eyes. They ordered and the bishop proposed a toast and they began to drink. Now with the bishop there no one, out of respect, would congratulate or disturb Old Pete or attempt to enter their circle.

Old Pete drank quickly and wanted very badly to excuse himself but he had such a great fear and respect of anyone in the Orthodox clergy, and the bishop especially, that he was afraid to excuse himself. Jesus, God, he said to himself, you don't suppose Nick *does* know? God, if he knew and with that crazy wild temper of his, you don't suppose he'd blow up and tell Mary? No! No! No, he'd never hurt his mother that way. But, Jesus, the way he did things without even thinking.

Nick could see that Old Pete was visibly disturbed, and edgy, and wanted to get away but knew, too, Old Pete's fear of anyone connected with the church and thought that Old Pete must feel he was neglecting his duties at host. Nick turned to the bishop: 'I think my father better run along. He has much to do.'

'Of course,' the bishop said. 'And God be with you.'

'You will dance with me later, won't you Mr Stratton?' Nora asked Old Pete.

'Sure - Yeah - Of course. I'd be happy to. You have good taste, son,' he blurted and bowed and kissed the bishop's ring again and left, calmly somehow, somehow hiding with all his practiced control the sense of frenzy and panic that was in him.

'Isn't that Lou Duck over there?' Nora asked.

'You know him?' Nick asked.

'I've eaten in his restaurant a lot,' Nora said. 'I don't think he'll recognize me.'

The bishop excused himself. Nick bent over and kissed his ring, then Nora extended her hand to him, and he walked away with the tall staff in his hand.

It was a ballroom in itself with tables for eight and four bars in the room and a huge glistening chandelier in the centre of the room. There was to be no limit to the drinking, and champagne with the dinner, and the orchestra was to play until two in the morning. Then special guests were to use three adjoining suites Old Pete had taken upstairs for a special after-the-party party.

Nick checked with the head waiter to see what table they would eat at. It was a table right next to the bridal table and Pierro and Marci, and Raul and Raul's father and mother (Nick had wangled them an invitation) were to be seated with them. Old Pete had had sense enough, Nick was relieved, not to put Pat at the same table and, undoubtedly, had put Yvonne with Pat.

'I have never been to a wedding like this one,' Nora said. 'Not even in Lake Forest.'

There were four violin players strolling about the room and Nick noticed that the receiving line was finally busting up and saw his mother coming towards them. He introduced Nora.

'I understand you went to Saint Mary's,' Mary said to Nora. 'I went to the Madams of the Sacred Heart. In Lake Forest,' Mary added.

'My God, you look Nick's age,' Nora complimented her. 'It's almost impossible to believe you're Nick's mother.'

'That's no compliment,' Nick said putting his arm around

his mother. His mother kissed him affectionately on the cheek. 'You've done it up beautifully, Mother.'

Then Nora and Mary began to chat about the importance of good Catholic education and the refinements of the Catholic way of life.

'Nick's told me so much about you,' she said before she left. 'But he didn't say half enough. I do hope you'll come out and have dinner with us soon.'

'I'd love to,' Nora said.

Then Mary reached over and kissed her sweetly on the cheek as if she were a child, in much the same way she kissed Nick. They did not know that when they were talking to Mary Old Pete was hiding behind a marble pillar, watching.

'The Greeks have certainly come up in the world,' Nora said.

'Yes,' Nick said. 'They overdo it a bit, I think like all the nouveau riche, but they sure deck their women out. Most of these people were penniless ten years ago. Now look at them,' Nick said, a note of pride in his voice. 'I don't know what it is about Greek men and jewellery. They're always buying their wives jewellery. My father says it's not a Greek idea but a Jewish one. He says the Jews say you can look like a bum yourself but if your wife looks prosperous everyone will *believe* you're prosperous.'

'It seems to me I've seen your father before,' she said.

'Probably at Lou Duck's,' Nick said casually. 'You look wonderful, Nora. And you are.'

He stepped back a bit and looked at her standing there very poised in a simple black chiffon dress with a boat neck and low v-cut back and the single strand of pearls.

They had several drinks and Nick proudly introduced Nora around, then there was an announcement that dinner was to be served.

'We're sitting with that goddamn stuffed shirt cousin of mine,' Nick said. 'The architect I told you about. And Raul's father and mother and Raul.'

'We'll have a laugh with Raul's father anyhow,' she smiled.

They sat down and Nick introduced Nora. Nora and Marci began to chat at once. Raul's father was a little drunk already. They had dinner and they sipped champagne while

all the speeches were going on, then, before the speeches were even over, Nick got a waiter to bring them some gin drinks, which caused a slight disturbance at their table. And being so close to the head table it embarrassed Pierro considerably because no one else had ordered special drinks for their tables.

After the speeches were over the ladies excused themselves and Nick said to Pierro,

'I think I'll go ask my mother for a dance. You ought to dance with your sister, Pierro,' he added. 'Come on, let's go do our duty while our women are gone.'

'Of course,' Pierro said, knowing that it would please his mother and please Aunt Mary if he and Nick went up to the table together to dance with their mother and sister respectively.

They performed their duty, then returned to the table. Old Pete seemed very pleased watching them perform their duty, in spite of his new overwhelming plight.

Nick truly enjoyed the dance with his mother. 'Now I've got the most beautiful woman in the room,' he had told her when they were dancing. 'How did you ever come to marry an old man like that?'

'Love, Nickie,' his mother said gaily. 'Some day you'll fall in love,' she said romantically, dramatically. 'I like Nora. You should have told me more about her.'

'I tried. It's Yvonne who doesn't like her.'

'Yvonne's still a child, Nick,' she said. 'I'm very proud of you tonight. Some day the world will know what you boys went through. Then maybe they'll stop all this nonsense.'

Lou Duck had come up to the speaker's table while Nick was dancing with his mother. He whispered to Old Pete: 'Christ, Pete, you see who your kid's with?'

'Christ, yes, I saw,' Old Pete said wiping the perspiration from his forehead. 'I'm a wreck.'

'Does he know anything?'

'For Christ's sake, I don't even think he knows she's a whore. That's how goddamn dumb he is in some ways. He thinks she's a rich widow.'

'Oh my God,' Lou Duck said in one quick breath and crossed himself Orthodox fashion. 'I don't think she'll say nothing, do you?' he asked not affirmatively.

'She wouldn't dare,' Old Pete said, but still not affirmatively.

'No, she wouldn't, I don't think,' Lou Duck said almost affirmatively.

'No,' Old Pete said almost convinced.

'Hell, I wouldn't worry about it,' Lou Duck said.

'Hell no,' Old Pete said.

At times they were certainly good for each other, Old Pete Stratton and Lou Duck. When times were tough, they had always been good for each other.

Marci and Nora came back and Yvonne and Pat came over to their table to say hello. Pat felt very young, very out of place, very unworldly talking to Marci and Nora. Marci noticed how Pat looked at Nick adoringly and thought it odd. She didn't seem the kind at all who would get a crush on Nick. Pat excused herself quickly saying she had promised to dance with her father. Raul asked Yvonne to dance, then Raul's father asked Nora to dance. And Nick, not about to be stuck with Raul's mother who was trying to entice Marci into a conversation about 'we of the theatre', asked Marci to dance. Marci was not anxious to dance with him but she wasn't too anxious to talk to Raul's mother about the stage either. Nick was very pleased with himself leaving Pierro there with Raul's mother.

When the dance ended, they went back to the table and joined the others. When the next dance was about to begin, Old Pete came walking by. He had been going from table to table greeting everyone. 'You promised to dance with me, Mr Stratton,' Nora said.

Old Pete Stratton thought quickly. Well, I might as well get it over with. We might as well find out where we stand with this whore.

Nora danced with Old Pete playing out her role of the widow, calling him Mr Stratton and acting reserved, and casually informing him that Nick knew little about her. He came off the dance floor reassured, feeling extremely young and extremely light on his feet for one his age, knowing that this was one story that would never get around. (The only ones who knew about it were the ones who stood to suffer from it.) No, it would never get around. Old Pete, after he had deposited Nora back at her table, decided he

was going to get drunk. He hadn't been drunk in twenty years but, by God, if there was ever an occasion to get drunk it was tonight, now.

They drank and danced and talked and laughed. It was truly a very successful party. About midnight, Old Pete began to feel his drinks. He went up to the bandstand and made an announcement:

'Old Gus brought his zither. And Little Joe is here to lead the Greek dance. Shall we dance?' he asked in Greek. Nick translated what his father had said to others at their table. Old Pete was met with resounding applause.

Nick hadn't seen Gus or Joe since he had arrived, undoubtedly because they were far back in the room where the poorer relatives were seated.

Nick waved Old Gus and Little Joe of the one eye over to the table and introduced them around. Gus sat on the edge of the bandstand and Old Pete asked for silence, then Gus began to play. He played several old hill laments and all the Greeks who were there began to sing or hum along softly. A nostalgic air came over the room and someone turned the lights down low. Gus played beautifully, as Nick had never heard him play before, and there was tragedy in the songs, and gentleness, and a terrible longing. Many of the older Greeks were misty eyed or crying openly. Marci cried a little it was so beautiful, and when the final lament ended there were long seconds of silence before the applause broke out.

And Nora, too, was on the verge of tears. But they would be hysterical tears if they ever started, she knew, and held herself in check. She had had a considerable amount to drink and when drinking, when not working and drinking, and trying to forget, she would often cry uncontrollably, hysterically. Looking around the room, feeling the great open compassionate and passionate love (all at once) of these people for their native land, she felt more alone than she had ever, she believed, felt. And, somehow, too, ashamed of what she was, what she had let herself become. Almost tenderly she put her hand on Nick's hand stroking it almost reverently as if that hand were the one anchor that she had left in this world.

Nick, carried away himself, but feeling this tenderness and longing and loneliness in Nora, something he had never felt

with her before, looked into her eyes. To him it only added another dimension to the woman she was.

Then Old Pete got up and announced that Little Joe would begin the Greek dance. Little Joe, very tipsy, walked across the dance floor proudly to where Yvonne was sitting. With a flourish, he took the handkerchief from his breast pocket and twisted it and gave one end to Yvonne, holding on to the other, signifying that she was his choice to lead the dance with him. Several other older Greeks joined Old Gus on the edge of the bandstand. They had mandolins and after a moment, while Yvonne and Joe stood posed in the middle of the floor, began to play the gay, wild, sometimes frenzied dance songs of the poor people of the Greek Hills.

As they began to dance, Joe, with the proud authority of one who had been decorated by the King of Greece himself as the finest dancer in the Greek Army, spotted Nick and signaled for him to join in the line and Nick took Nora's hand (she was slightly reluctant at first) and went up and joined in and soon the line was at least forty people long, with everyone hopping and hollering, as the music became more wild, more frenzied. Marci had also joined in, with Raul's father, who was continually out of step and very drunk and very funny. Finally, with the perspiration dripping from everyone's face, the Greek dancing ended and the orchestra began to play again.

Nick asked Little Joe and Old Gus to come over to his table which considerably disturbed Pierro. Marci was fascinated by Old Gus and she thought Little Joe was very funny. Old Gus, zither in his lap, spoke of what a great fisherman Nick was and what a fine time they had had on their trip.

'Nick,' he finally said, 'that is where you belong. In some place like that.'

'I agree,' Pierro said. 'A nice isolated island somewhere would be ideal for you, Nickie.' When Pierro said 'Nickie', Nick became instantly angered and aroused. Often when they were children they had gotten into terrible fights because Pierro had called him that.

'Well, I've got an isolated island,' Nick said sardonically, glaring at Pierro. 'I bought one and I'm having a shack put up on it. You want to lease it? You might be able to actually get some work done down there. Actually create something,

instead of always talking about it. And what a great form of art it is.'

'What do you know about art?' Pierro said aloofly.

'I've got feeling, I can tell you that,' Nick said. 'I can tell a good painting when I see it. I can tell good writing when I read it. There's fury and vitality and honesty-self-exposure in real art. That's something I don't think you learned at LRT. And I doubt if you'll ever learn it.'

'You're feeling your liquor again,' Pierro said.

'How would you know what it's like to feel liquor? Or anything else?'

'They have been doing this since they were tiny boys,' Old Gus said to Marci, smiling. Gus had on his only suit, which was a used gabardine that he had bought down on Maxwell Street from a suit vendor for four dollars. With the suit he wore a blue workshirt and a brown tie. 'They fight, then when the first of them dies the other will do the most of the crying at the funeral,' Old Gus said.

'Do not talk about death at a wedding,' Little Joe of the one eye said seriously. 'You want to mess up this marriage before she begins?'

'I've never heard anyone play the zither as beautifully as you,' Marci said to Old Gus. 'I would love to hear you play again sometime.'

'Did you really buy an island?' Nora whispered to Nick. Nora was drinking rapidly now.

'Yes.'

'Where did you get the money?'

'It's a small island and was cheap,' Nick said. Then smiled. 'Be respectful, woman. I'm in real estate now.'

'Could we come by your shack some night?' Marci asked Gus. 'Will you play for us?'

'Any time,' Old Gus said.

'You'll take me, won't you, Pierro?'

'If you like,' Pierro said as if preoccupied.

'Nick,' Nora said, 'you promised to take me, too. But you mustn't play all sad songs,' she looked at Gus. 'I'm afraid I'd cry if you did.'

'It is good to cry sometimes,' Old Gus said. 'Ask Nick. He cries whenever he feels like it. In front of anyone.'

'I don't believe it,' Nora said.

'Then you don't know him,' Gus said in a kindly voice.

'It's true,' Nick said. 'I cry easy. I cry mostly, though, when I am extremely happy, which is rare. I cry because I don't want the happiness to end.'

'Yes,' Old Gus said, 'that is a reason. We must get back to our table - Come Little Joe,' Old Gus said. And Little Joe got up and made just about the most elaborate attempt of a debonair, man-of-the-world farewell Nick had ever seen. Then just before he departed, he said to Pierro: 'You see that present I got for your sister? I paid one hundred dollars cash for that present. Cash,' he said proudly and Nick noticed the reddish tint of embarrassment penetrate slightly the dark brown skin on Pierro's dark, ancient face.

'I think it's time we got on,' Nick whispered to Nora.

'Where will we go?' she asked.

'Home?'

'Let's go some place first. Let's let ourselves go. Really go. Have fun. Then go home,' she said turbulently.

Marci was watching them. My God, is that what it is, she half laughed to herself. Why don't they just do it on the table, she thought, but feeling an excitation of her own. She decided then, instantly, that she was going to sleep with Pierro this night.

Nick excused himself to go tell his mother and father he was leaving. As he was coming back to the table, passing the bar, Lou Duck called him over. He was very drunk and put his arm around Nick and whispered in a secret way: 'You got some guts, kid. Some guts, I tell you, bringing that whore.'

'You're drunk,' Nick said.

'How much she charge you, kid? When I was a kid your age, I no pay for it. I tell you that. Even now old as I am I get it for nothing,' he said drunkenly, braggingly.

'Have you blown your top?' Nick looked at him quiz-zically.

Lou Duck, cigar in mouth, drink in hand, drunken eyed, continued on as if he hadn't even heard Nick. 'Bringing one of the biggest call broads in the city to his own family wedding and passing her off as a respectful widow. You're something, kid. Did she tell you who's best? You? Or the old man? Or me? She's not bad, I can tell you that. Well,

I guess that makes us all brothers, eh?' he said grinning a titillated grin. 'Eh, Nickie?' he snickered, then began to laugh a snickering laugh.

Things began, suddenly, to fall into place. Nick wanted terribly to smash Lou Duck's face in, to shove his fist right through it. He shoved the old Greek away roughly and stormed away towards the table, then just before he got there he slowed down and with clenched fists, and a nauseous, sickening-to-have-to-take-hold of himself.

'Let's go, Nora,' he said penetratingly.

Everyone stopped talking. Even Pierro could never remember having seen Nick so enraged. Nora could tell something had gone terribly wrong. She had never seen him like this and she herself was frightened. You don't suppose his father told him - No, of course, he wouldn't dare, she said to herself.

'Now. Please,' Nick said to her deliberately, commandingly.

She nodded and he nodded to everyone at the table and they began to walk out of the room: 'What's wrong, Nick?' she asked putting her arm through his.

'Not a goddamn thing. Not a fucking, goddamn thing. Let's take a ride.'

Chapter Twenty Six

THEY did not say a word. They got into the car and he began to drive feeling the sickness ballooning up in him, a sick hungry bottomless feeling, then blind anger at the deliberate attempt she had made to hurt him, wanting to smash his fist again and again onto something, to gnash his teeth like a crazied dog, his fist clenched tight to the wheel, his knuckles white, feeling he wanted to scream out his misery and anguish - Scream - Smash - Blindness - then suddenly she tugging at his arm, then screaming, terrifyingly.

'Nick, Nick!•Slow down. For God's sake, slow down!'

He actually shook his head like a fighter shaking off a punch and recovering a little saw the terrified look on her face then his eyes shifted to the speedometer. He was going over eighty north down the outer drive. Quickly he braked way down so that he was under the limit and looking over at her saw that she was actually shaking, her head in her hands, then she began to cry, uncontrollably.

He could feel the blood pounding in his head. His breath seemed choked. Christ, look at him. Look at that face, he said to himself, looking into the car mirror. Is there murder in you? Is this what you have become because you are used to killing? Do you, somehow, glory in this fury, this rage, that must be so deeply and furiously imbedded in you that it frightens people into hysterical half images of themselves? Is there a devil of some sort in you that in the futility and totality or your rage you are blind, no longer of yourself, black in a light world, unseeing and unperceiving as if truly enshrouded in the cloak of some invisible Lucifer?

His control suddenly began to come back.

What reason did he really have to believe what Lou Duck had said? What reason to believe a horny (that was the only word for him), snickering old man? And when he was drunk besides? Stupid, sloppy, horny old man who stroked and pawed at every woman who ever worked for him. He could hear Lou Duck's titillated laugh ringing in his ears. And again he wanted to *smash - smash - smash* -.

I must be drunk, he thought suddenly. Drunk.

Castration upon castration.

And Lou Duck's face loomed large: Snickering. Perverted. Old. Sex hungered like a dog in heat. Old and perverted and snickering and titillated and pawing. *Rip the scrotum from him. Hear the tear.*

I am drunk.

Drunk, he wanted to holler.

The mind began to focus again. She was crying hysterically loudly.

As they passed other cars, or other cars passed them, the passengers looked over - wondering. They must be able to hear her, he thought.

He put his arm around her gently, patting her. She came

over close by him. He was about to say: 'I think I'm drunk. I'm sorry.' But through her half hysteria she spoke first.

'I'm sorry, Nick. Sorry,' she said loudly. 'I do that. Drive that fast,' she mumbled, 'when I'm upset. This has been coming on - all day,' she whimpered.

He turned off the drive at Belmont Avenue. Found a parking space. Put up the top. Held her while she cried herself out. Then they went over to Clark Street and stopped at the first bar they passed and went in. He got her a double brandy while she went into the ladies' room.

She came out looking, almost, as if she hadn't even been crying.

'God but you get mad, too, don't you?' she smiled. It was a weak smile. 'I'd better take a pill,' she said going into her large black alligator bag.

'What do they do?'

'Calm me, I guess.'

'If I was sure of that I'd take a few myself.'

'I don't think you'd beter,' she said smiling, making him feel even guiltier than the first time she had smiled weakly. It was a kind of frightened, forced, weak (and weary) little smile, he thought, feeling guiltier the more he thought about it. Silently he began to admonish himself. There was no reason for him to act like he had - even if Lou Duck was right.

Right?

Oh, you fool. You goddamn punk fool. You suspicious fool. Being taken in by an ex-pimp, ex-conman. And drunk. Paralyzed, sloppy drunk.

'What are you so serious about?' she asked. She was smart enough *not* to ask him what had enraged him though she had wanted to several times.

'I can't figure out why my old man infuriates me so easily,' he lied.

'Was that it?'

'It always starts off simply enough but then he gets me in a boil. He gets in a boil, too. But never when there's anyone around. Then he always plays the wounded angel. Christ,' he lied again, 'all I said was that I was leaving. And he said I should be the last to leave. Then we just got into it. And he said I'm crazy in the head from the war. He's

been saying it over and over. I think it frightens me. Then it infuriates me. - Do you think I'm a little off?

'There's nothing wrong with you, Nick,' she said. 'We all get mad at times. This kind of life isn't going to be easy to get used to after the one you've been leading,' she said sympathetically. 'I mean, there's not much excitement in the offing. I think we all like excitement.'

'Well, you had your cry. I blew my top. Let's go to Hy's and have a drink or two. We haven't been to Hy's since we met.'

It was fine with her and they went down to the Four Winds. Hy was not there, the head waiter said. It was his poker night.

After two furious, tension mounting drinks he suddenly said: 'Let's go.'

'Now, right now,' she said throatily and he felt a warm flash wing through him.

Inside the door, close to her, his mouth in the curve of her neck, her body long against his body, full free wanting-to-give against him, feeling not only through her touch, but through some imperceptible thing that hovered between them, all at once sacred and pagan, was it Truth? Was that why it was now as it never had been, never could have been, never dreamed that it was? Was this truth? I do not care if she is a whore, or white, or diseased, only that this here and this now was, as it was intended to be, always, forever. Could it really be? Was this truth him? Constellation beyond constellation. Universe beyond universe. To know now the weightlessness of space and what it feels to travel freely in the universe with Truth.

Then later: 'You're not sleepy, are you, Nick?' she asked.

'I've never known of love like I feel it with you,' he said.

'I feel it too, Nick. I want to make you feel like a king sometimes. The King of All Kings.'

'You do,' he said.

'You're so black,' she said.

'You said that like you wanted me black.' Her head was on his shoulder now. 'Did you ever have a black man or want one?'

'I never had one. I thought I never could want one. But

one night I went to a Katherine Dunham Dance Revue. There was one in the revue. He was from Trinidad, more brown than black. I wanted him. When I saw him dance I wanted him. And for a long time afterwards.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Six months.'

'Not long ago,' he spoke airily. 'Let's have a drink.'

'We'll fix it together.'

'Fine.'

They got up and fixed their drinks. Then he took a quick shower and came back and sat on the edge of the bed next to her.

'Have you had a lot of men?' he asked her. He had thought when he was in the shower he would ask her that. He did not want to ask it really. To know. And knew that now that he had started he wouldn't be able to stop. It had just come out, inevitably. It was going to come out sometime, some way, anyhow. Even *he* knew that.

'Is that a fair question?' she asked.

'You don't have to answer,' he said in that half sardonic way of his. 'If you're so damned ashamed of it. All you damn Catholics are ashamed of it, aren't you? But you do it just as much as everyone else.'

'Do you have to spoil it, Nick? Do you have to?'

'I guess it's spoiled already, isn't it? Maybe you spoiled it that night you said you weren't feeling well and had me drop you off - what did you do that night, for instance?'

'You Greek bastard.'

'And where did you learn all that fine language you use? At Saint Mary's?'

'Who told you?' she said glaring at him suddenly. 'Who told you I was a whore?'

He sat there dumbstruck, speechless for a moment, the vast reality of it sinking in slowly against the grain that did not want to let it sink in.

'A whore?' he said emptily.

Then she realized that he hadn't really known, or wasn't really sure.

Then it hit him. Hit him like the first time he had been hit in the war.

'One of your customers,' he said. 'One of your dirty old

men customers,' he said viciously. 'Lou Duck by name. Lou Duck. Horny old Lou Duck,' he said feeling miserable and castrated and then suddenly throwing his drink furiously across the room against the wall, glass and liquid splattering.

'Is this the same bullshit you tell Lou Duck?' he said contortedly, wild eyed. 'Is this the same bullshit you gave Old Pete? Is it?' he practically screamed, knowing that now that he had started it he would never be able to stop it.

'You know it's not like that with you, Nick,' she said in that cold controlled way. 'You know that.'

'How's Old Pete in the sack?' he asked cynically. 'Tell me, how's my old man in the sack?'

It was still hard for him to really believe it - a whore. A rotten whore.

'Fine,' she said. 'Remarkable for his age, actually. Is that what you wanted to hear? It is, isn't it? Because you've got a filthy rotten suspicious mind. You have to hear it, don't you? Do you want me to tell you about Lou Duck's fetishes, too? That should really please you. You fool. You goddamn punk kid fool,' she said her eyes blazing, sitting there propped up on the bed nude, unaware of her nudity it seemed.

Nick felt sick, almost like he would have to vomit. Old Pete, he said to himself. It would have to be Old Pete. And dancing with her, openly, right in front of Mary. The son-of-a-bitch. Old Pete, he felt like screaming. Always, Old Pete!

'Why didn't you tell me? For Christ's sake, why?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I swear to Christ I don't know, Nick,' she said, her voice quivering as if she were about to cry again.

'You swear to Christ. That means a hell of a lot - you swearing to Christ. That really means a hell of a lot. I suppose you go to confession every Saturday. I suppose that's all the license you need to be a whore.'

He could see the anger and hurt and animal vengeance that-comes-from-sudden-fear welling up in her eyes and her brown shoulders go all taut and the pointed swelling of the nipples of the small firm pointed breasts.

'I suppose you think I enjoy it. I suppose you really

think I enjoy it,' she said. 'What are you complaining about? You're not paying for it. You've got one of the highest priced women in this country and you're not paying one red cent for it. That ought to give you something to brag about. To brag to Raul and Tuttle and Old Pete and Lou Duck. Ask Old Pete what he pays. Or Lou Duck what he pays. Then tell them you're getting it for nothing. That ought to make you feel just about as manly as even you could want to feel. It would make you unique. Unique. That's what you want to be so badly, isn't it little Nickie? You don't have to ask, Nick. I wouldn't want you to be like all the rest and have you ask: How did a girl like you ever get into the racket? God forbid, I wouldn't want you to ask that! That would make you like all the rest then, wouldn't it Nick? Just like all the rest. And you couldn't stand that. You want to hear what your father's like in the bed? - You couldn't stand that, could you Nickie? Could you?'

Her face was all twisted up and he thought she was on the verge of becoming hysterical.

'Stop it,' he said. 'For Christ's sake, stop it.'

'Yes, Master. Stop it. Start it whenever you want and stop it whenever you want. Resolve it. Now. Here. Well I'm not going to stop it. I'm not going to stop it just because you want me to stop it. You might as well hear it. Every bit of it. It's really a very interesting story. It's too bad you can't write because it's really a very unusual story - from the steel mill district of Gary to Saint Mary's to respectable wife to whore. Really, it is, don't you think? Whore? Hell, I'm not even a whore. Not a real real whore in the old sense. I'm a call girl. That makes me kind of special. Who do you suppose made up the word call girl? It had to be a man, didn't it Nickie? Obviously a common phrase like that had to come from some common man who wanted to feel uncommon, didn't it Nick?' She drank her drink down, started to walk from the room, then paused and said, 'Would you like another drink, Nick? I'll fix you one if you promise not to smash the glass. Or would you prefer to leave? Wouldn't you prefer to leave, Nickie? Wouldn't the big soldier boy prefer to leave so that he will live to fight another day? I'm sure you came to

me a virgin,' she said icily. Standing there nude she looked at the dejected figure sitting on the edge of the bed.

'I won't break any more glasses,' he said. 'Make me a big one - I suppose you go with women, too,' he blurted suddenly.

'Women are the only ones who can do anything for me,' she said. 'That is until I met you.' She was standing by the door. 'Of course I hate to tell you that. I wouldn't want you to swell up any bigger than you are. But as long as I'm being honest I might as well be completely honest. It's been so long since I've been honest. Of course, you're honest all the time, aren't you, Nick? Virgin Nick - I'm sure you never laid a hand on Ellen that night you went out to the country club with her for dinner. Remember telling me on the phone: It was more or less a duty date, Nora dear. Loyal, faithful, Nick.' She walked from the room.

She came back with the drinks.

'I think you ought to hear it all. I think you deserve to hear it all. After all, you're so goddamn possessive of me, you think you own me so thoroughly. I think it's only fair that you know what you own. Don't you, Nickie? You can't answer that, can you?

'Well, I'm mentally and physically unbalanced; that's what's wrong with me. My husband died when he was having intercourse with me and I went insane. I was institutionalized. In one of the finest, most exclusive institutions in this part of the country. It costs a lot of money to be institutionalized. And a lot of money to prove that you're mentally capable. You must admit I am capable, anyhow, mustn't you, Nick?

'Oh, it was a very fine institution. First they convince you how very unbalanced you really are. Which is not difficult. You ought to see some of the people in those institutions. Really, after you've lived with them a while it's not very hard to be convinced. Then when you are thoroughly convinced - have no confidence whatsoever except in the doctor who has in a sense become your father, someone you look up to, then to reassure yourself you sleep with him, and somehow, some way, it gets around to the attendants who immediately begin to treat you kind of extra special, then you begin to sleep with

them. Oh, it is very reassuring in an institution. And then one day, when you are slightly reassured, you wake up and realize that if you don't get out of that place soon all your money will be gone. Then you hire an attorney, an old friend of your husband's and, of course, out of habit, you sleep with him. It's very reassuring,' she said bitterly. 'For some reason, lawyers and doctors never seem to make any allowance for that on their bills. I suppose it's because they want their secretaries, if they're not sleeping with them, to believe in the upstandingness and virtuousness of their employers.'

'Nora,' he started.

'Well, I got out of there. I had never had any money of my own until my husband died. And I couldn't get the thought of the way he died out of my mind. It was as if, as if - I killed him. I tried everything to blot it out. First it was liquor. Then marijuana. And men. Then women. Everything but the main-line. For some reason I never tried that. I had to get out of Chicago so I went to Miami. I stayed at the best hotels and went out every night and went to the races every day. I couldn't get rid of that picture, no matter what I tried. Soon my money was gone. Travelling with the kind of people I did it was natural I drifted into this. And believe me, Nick, I loathe it. I'm on a treadmill and I can't get off,' she said distantly but, nevertheless, slightly bitterly.

'And me?' he asked weakly.

'I thought you were different. For me you were.'

He put his drink down and came around to the side of the bed where she lay propped up. He put his hand on her shoulders but he could feel that she didn't want him to touch her and he took his hands away. 'I'm sorry, Nora,' he said, then paused for a long while.

'We can get out of this,' he spoke softly.

'How?' she asked, still bitter and remote.

'Marry me,' he said.

Her eyes, startled, shifted to his.

There were seconds of silence.

'I don't want pity, Nick,' she said. 'We'd never be happy if I married you because you pitied me.'

'But I love you. I told you that before. I love you. I'll

go to work next week. And work hard. Please, Nora.'

'You don't think Old Pete would let you marry me. You know better than that. He'd cut you off cold.'

'We'll go away then. I can get a job.'

'What can you do, Nick?'

He started vacantly at the floor for a moment.

'I'm sorry, Nick. It would be impossible.'

And suddenly he began to cry. He sat there on the edge of the bed, in his shorts, with the drink in his hand looking so terribly old for one so young. She had never heard a man cry like that before. It was almost like the whimpering of an animal. She reached out her arms and took his head in her hands and laid his head between her breasts and stroked his hair.

'I'm sorry, Nick,' she said.

Then, suddenly, she knew for the first time that she was really in love with him.

He cried for a half hour, then fell asleep. At noon he awoke and she was gone. She had left a note on the night stand: *Thanks for everything, Nick, I don't think we should see each other again. Good luck to you always. And if it makes any difference I shan't ever forget you.*

Never before in his life had he felt so truly bewildered. He dressed as if in a daze and went outside into the bright sun. He was still too confused to begin to analyze it all, and too tired. But walking to the car he thought: A cat has nine lives. But how many times does a man die?

Because somehow that was the way he felt.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Gus was working in his garden on his hands and knees when Nick arrived. He stood and brushed his long bony hands together and wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his forearm and came over and kissed Nick on the side of the cheek. .

'Come inside,' he said in Greek. 'We have something.'
'No drink,' Nick said. 'I don't feel like having a drink.'
'Turkish coffee,' Gus said.

'Fine.'

'You are hurt bad,' Old Gus said. 'It is all over you.'

'Yes.'

'By pain you learn of yourself,' Old Gus said without sympathy, putting the Turkish coffee into the little brass pot on the oneburner stove. 'To learn of ourselves is to grow.'

'You make it sound so easy. I don't know what it is about this shack but for me it is the only peaceful place in the city. You go to no one. You have nothing. Yet everyone comes here. Even the priest comes here and visits you even though you do not go to church. Old Pete will not make a business deal without coming here for advice. Yet you know nothing of business. The people of Marco loved you and took to you as if you were one of their own. They respected me as a fisherman and because I did not pry into their business, but you they accepted fully. Since I was a boy, since my grandfather died, I always came here. But never unless I was low or remorseful. I have never brought you anything but my troubles. What are you?'

'Nick, do not worry so much that you always owe so much. How can you have any idea what I get from you?'

'Maybe, then, it is the truth that you have the evil eye,' Nick said trying to make a joke but unable to make it come off very well. 'Maybe you sap my strength when I am here.'

Gus smiled anyhow.

'I am going to work for my father,' Nick said.

'Yes.'

'You knew?'

'I thought,' Old Gus said. 'Is that what you truly want?' he asked still in Greek.

'I don't know what I want,' Nick said.

'You have much company in this world,' Gus said. 'You were happy in a way in the islands, - when you fished and rode upon the sea. Your happiness was obvious.'

'Yes, I was happy,' Nick said. 'For a few days I was happy.'

'You lost your woman,' Old Gus said. He was stirring his coffee.

'I found out that she was a prostitute. And that she was sleeping with my father. I asked her to marry me, anyhow. She won't marry me.'

'Then she is smart in a way. Prostitute or no prostitute.'

'I don't understand?' Nick questioned.

'Unless you change much, it would be impossible for her to marry you. Unless your power to forgive and forget is stronger in you than most men, it would be impossible.'

Nick did not answer. Old Gus brought him a demitasse. He knew Nick liked his heavy.

'I am lucky in many ways,' Nick said after a while. 'I'm alive, which is a miracle in itself. I have seen much beauty.'

'Yes,' Old Gus said, 'even beauty in men at war.'

'In the land, in nature, I saw beauty,' Nick said. 'In men I did not see much beauty. I saw much pride. And nobility of a kind - but the beauty was of the land.'

'You are of the land,' Old Gus said. 'Are you not?'

'Yes'.

'You have seen beauty in the spawning of fish. And in the way a leopard walks. And monkeys protect their young. And yet you see no beauty in man, huh? Then it must be because you do not look for it. It seems whenever you look for it somewhere else you find it easily enough.'

'I see beauty in that woman,' Nick said. 'Even if she is a whore.'

'You are sure of that?'

'Yes.'

'Then why did you not ask her to marry you before?'

'I don't know.'

'I am sure that you are not in love, then.'

'Why?' Nick asked.

'A lover must be able to accept all that is hard and bitter for the sake of one he loves. Love believes that nothing is impossible. It feels no burden. It makes one stronger than his own strength. The way you are tonight is the opposite. You must admit it. You are a man. I will not lie to you, Nick. Nor try to make it easy for you.'

'No, but I hate your guts sometimes for the sense you make.'

'You come here looking for a father.'

'I don't understand,' Nick said. 'You said "father" so funny.'

'Nor do I completely,' Gus said. 'I think it is God the Father whom we all look for.'

'Pierro is going to be married,' Nick said.

'You do not like to talk about fathers,' Old Gus said.

'No,' Nick said emphatically.

'That is news. Will his wife leave the stage?'

'I don't know.'

'And will he go on with his work as he planned?'

'I don't know,' Nick said. 'What do you think?'

'Marriage will present many complications to one like Pierro,' Old Gus contemplated. 'Is the young one from Atlanta still at your home?'

'Yes. Why do you ask?'

'Wondering,' Old Gus said. 'More Turkish coffee?'

Nick nodded.

'When will you go to work?' Gus asked.

'Day after tomorrow.'

'So soon? Your father must be very pleased.'

'Yes,' Nick said. 'Play your zither, will you, Gus? Play a lament.'

'Of course, Nickie.'

Gus began to play and Nick sat there on the edge of the bunk smoking and drinking the Turkish coffee and listening. After a while there was a knock on the door.

'I didn't expect you so soon,' Gus said to whoever it was at the door. It was Marci and Pierro.

'I had a hard time convincing your cousin to come,' Marci said.

'Nick is here,' Old Gus said.

'He is?' Pierro said disappointedly.

'Come in. I have not much to offer you. But some wine. And a little of the ouzo.'

Nick got up from the edge of the bunk and walked across the wooden floor of the shack. He took Marci's hand. 'Is it true,' Nick asked, 'what I heard?'

'Yes,' she said.

Nick smiled sweetly. It was the first time that Marci had ever seen him smile like that, and years since Pierro had

seen him smile like that. But it was a familiar smile, Pierro remembered. It was really the way Nick had smiled on occasion a long time ago.

Nick took Marci's head in his hands tenderly, respectfully, and gently kissed her on the forehead. 'I hope you will have all the things you have dreamed of.'

Then he shook hands with Pierro: 'And you, too, Pierro. Have a wonderful family that is not as narrow as ours. And build great things.'

There was a moment of silence.

'I'm afraid I haven't been fair with you, Nick,' Marci said.

'When will it be?' Nick asked Marci.

'We'll announce it next month. And be married shortly afterwards.'

'Come,' Gus said. 'Now we must have some wine. And I will play whatever you want, Marci. And as long as you want.'

'I have often passed this shack and wondered about you. You are famous in Chicago for your goats.'

Pierro and Marci sat on the edge of the bunk and Nick sat on one of the old wooden chairs.

'What are *your* plans, Pierro?' Nick asked.

'Well, marriage is something I hadn't really planned on so soon,' Pierro said. 'One of my first reactions was to open an office here. That is if I can get the capital. Then I could do the kind of work I wanted. Go on along the lines I've been thinking, developing.'

'What about Bloomfield Hills?' Nick asked, without sarcasm.

'He can go to Bloomfield Hills if he wants,' Marci said. 'I don't care as long as he does what he thinks right. We've just been talking about that.'

'Bloomfield Hills was just a place to work, Marci. I told you that,' Pierro said.

'And Europe?' Nick asked.

'We'd still like that,' Marci said.

'But I think now I should get established first. It shouldn't take long. Marci's father is going to do what he can.'

'And I think we're all convinced of his talent,' Marci said, a note of pride in her voice.

'No one questions that. Not even me,' Nick said seriously. 'Will you be able to raise the money, Pierro?'

'I hope so. I think Old Pete will help.'

'I have a little,' Nick said. 'I could help you with a little.'

'What the hell's come over you today?' Pierro said to Nick. 'Is he delirious, Uncle Gus?' Pierro had always called him 'Uncle' though they were cousins.

Gus was pouring the wine.

'That's wonderfully kind of you, Nick,' Marci said sincerely.

'And your stage career?' Nick asked her.

'I've wired my agency. I've cancelled out my summer show,' she said. Then, putting her hand behind her right ear and lifting her head high, she said in an almost perfect mimicry of Tallulah Bankhead: 'I'm afraid, dahling, I've given my farewell appearance.' Then, bringing her hand down and changing her expression completely, she said: 'Goddamn it, Pierro, come to think of it I never had a chance to make a farewell speech. That's really thwarting for an actress,' she laughed an infectious laugh.

They all laughed. Nick liked her very much this night. Then Gus brought the drinks around and they toasted Marci and Pierro.

'Well, in a few years we ought to have the city sewed up,' Nick said. It was the first time tonight, Gus noticed, that Nick's remorse seemed completely gone. 'I'm going to work for Old Pete.'

'Why, is something wrong with that?' Marci looked around.

'Wrong?' Pierro laughed. 'If those two are going to work together, it should be in a gym. Where they have a ring - I really didn't think you'd go to work for him. I mean I thought you would eventually, maybe. But not now.'

'Well,' Nick said taking a sip of the wine, 'I am going to work for him, nevertheless. And I'm going to try, Pierro. Hard. I only hope he'll give me something to really do. Something in which I can feel some sense of accomplishment.'

'You know Old Pete,' Pierro said considerately, knowing exactly what Old Pete would do to Nick when he got him in the firm, and now feeling (in an odd way) suddenly very sorry for Nick.

'And what are your problems, Gus?' Marci asked conversationally, smiling.

'I used to be a great creator of problems. I worked so hard, for so many years, creating them,' he said and smiled, 'that I thought it was time I retired from the creation of problems. It was a very difficult kind of retirement. Why at first I thought I would waste away and die,' he joked. 'But obviously I did not die though, as you can see, I've wasted away considerably.'

Marci laughed that infectious laugh again, openly acknowledging her affection for Old Gus.

'Who was that lovely girl you had with you last night?' Pierro asked. 'I must say she's certainly the biggest improvement I've seen you make in that category.'

'She *was* very nice,' Marci said.

Nick hid the mention of her name masterfully: 'She's a widow,' he said.

'Very young to be a widow,' Pierro said. 'But God, what some of these women can do with makeup. I'm glad you use hardly any, darling,' Pierro said to Marci. He seemed to speak differently to her now that they were engaged.

'Neither does Nora,' she looked over at Pierro admiringly for a moment. Then wondered again for a second why he would not sleep with her last night. My God, she had practically asked him. Then again she thought it must be a certain kind of refinement that was in him, a respect for her and the fact that he wanted to marry her. Certainly, she thought, he must have been thinking about asking me. It did not just come as a spur-of-the-moment gesture. No, Pierro was too well settled for that.

All that day it had been sifting into Pierro - the fact that he was going to be married. He had been up over fifteen minutes that morning before it had even occurred to him that he had asked her to marry him. It wasn't that he was disappointed that he had, it just came as a surprise to him that he had asked her so unpremeditatedly. It had never occurred to him before - the actual proposing. How did one go about proposing, he had asked himself when fully awake? I imagine, he had then told himself, in much the same way as I did last night.

Gus picked up his zither and began to play. Nick and Pierro sang some of the laments with him and Marci hummed along. Nick didn't feel like drinking too much but kept on getting a refill every time Pierro did. Nick had never seen Pierro drink so much so rapidly. After about an hour Nick could tell Pierro was beginning to get a little tight. It was incredible to Nick - Pierro getting tight.

Nick led Marci around the table in the Greek dance. Pierro clapped his hands to the music and applauded loudly when they finished.

'I think you've done wonders for him already,' Nick said to Marci, whispering. 'I've always wanted to see him let his hair down.'

'Me too,' Marci whispered. For a second, when he saw the little-girl-pulled-a-quickie of her eyes, she reminded Nick of Yvonne. 'Let's ply him,' Marci whispered again.

Nick, ever available when it came to a conspiracy of any sort, was especially pleased about this one.

'You know, Marci,' Pierro said, 'I think I'm getting a little drunk. I like it. I feel so light.'

'That's what I've been telling you,' Nick grinned.

'Nick, Nickie boy,' Pierro said. Then, very seriously: 'Do me a favour. Leave the room. Just for a second leave the room, uh?'

Nick was still grinning.

'I got a secret I want to ask Marci - Go on,' Pierro said like a little boy, then waved one arm drunkenly. 'Leave, Nichol. I'll call you when I'm done. One shecond.'

Nick went outside. The rain clouds had drifted out west and there was a strong, cool breeze coming from the lake. There was a heaven of stars and the moon shown on Gus's garden. It made Nick feel odd, always, coming out of Gus's shack and seeing all the cars travelling down the street about three hundred feet from the shack and the big buildings of the city surrounding the shack.

They called Nick back in a few moments later.

'Well, Marci and I have made a monumental decision,' Pierro said very dramatically.

This guy is really funny when he drinks, Nick thought. He's actually got a sense of humour.

'You know what?' Pierro asked.

Marci was smiling at Pierro.

'What?'

'Marci and I have made a decision, that's what.'

'The marriage is off,' Nick kidded.

'Shut up and listen,' Pierro said. 'You know I could always take you,' he said drunken eyed and wavering. 'Listen.'

'Well go ahead,' Nick said.

'Well, Marci and I, we decided, well, we decided,' he said kind of bashfully, 'we decided we wanted you to be our best man. Didn't we, Marci?' He spoke to Marci emphatically, as if the whole thing was Marci's idea.

'Pierro decided,' Marci spoke softly to Nick. 'I agreed.'

Nick was overwhelmed. He did not know what to say. Then turned back slowly.

'I play a happy song,' Gus said, picking up the zither.

'Thank you both,' Nick said before Gus started. Marci nodded and Pierro just waved his hand.

Nick carried Pierro out of Gus's about two in the morning. He put him gently in his car, stretching him out on the back seat. Then he and Marci got in front. 'He can pick his car up here tomorrow,' Nick said. 'Do you have this effect on all your fiancés?' Nick asked.

'All,' she smiled. 'I guess. This is the first.'

'And for real.'

'For real.'

They drove Pierro home and Nick carried him upstairs quietly and, without waking his mother, deposited him in his bed.

When he came back down he said to Marci: 'I think that did him a lot of good.'

'So do I,' she said.

He drove her home, walked her to the door, gave her a brotherly kiss on the forehead and left.

Driving to Winnetka the loneliness began to seep into him again. He wondered if maybe it wouldn't be a good thing for him to get married. That maybe it would be settling for him.

When he got home, there was a lone light on the front porch. Pat was on the swing, in her negligée, reading.

'Hello,' he said.

She smiled. 'It's awfully early for you, isn't it?'

'Come to think of it, it is. How about having a nightcap with me?'

She hesitated a moment. 'With you I will - rum and Coca-Cola,' she said finally and smiled.

Chapter Twenty Eight

TONIGHT, to him, she was almost everything the day had not been. She was like spring. Her eyes were green and she had a slightly tilted nose and she was not really pretty but like spring. He was still sad with the pain and humility of last night with Nora. But now it was a peaceful sadness, and almost pleasurable pain because, in this sudden calmness of sitting on the porch, he seemed in control of it, that he would be able to withstand it, bad as it was.

'You feel much better tonight,' Pat said.

'Yes, I think I drank too much last night,' he said. 'I guess everybody did.'

She was still on the swing, rocking it gently. He was sitting in his favourite old wicker chair and outside he could see fireflies in the bushes. It was very quiet in the late night.

'My father drank too much too,' she said without a trace of admonishment.

They began to talk. He told her about how he had enjoyed his younger summer days up in Wisconsin, and how he liked the wilderness of Florida, and the sea, and finally about some of the places he had been to during the war, - the pleasurable things he had done and seen then.

'You know, Nick, I'm not afraid of you any more,' she said,

'Why? - Should you have been?'

'I was afraid of you. I've never known anyone like you,' she said placidly, innocently.

'Nor have I known anyone as sweet as you,' he smiled.

'That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.'

'Then I'm even more disappointed in people,' he said and sipped on his drink which he had almost finished now. She had only taken a sip or two of hers.

'How many days will you stay?' he asked her.

'Three. Maybe four.'

'I'll show you around then.'

'I'd like that, Nick.'

Now, suddenly, she remembered her aunt telling her that still in the hills of Greece the young groom must sometime during the wedding night bring the bloodied sheet of his bride to the home of his family to prove her virginity. But ingrained as it had been into her by her aunt, by her father, there was suddenly no longer any sanctity in the sacred membrane that was her hymen. She felt so safe with him now, secure with him now. And wanted him unashamedly. She wanted him to come over to her and take the clothes from her body and give herself to him fully and proudly. And wanted him to look at her, and feel of him, and love her. Now. Now. Now, the kindly passion welled in her.

Nick put his glass down and stood up. He stared down at her, then smiled. He moved towards her and she felt her stomach tremble hollowly and the vibrant feeling of her flesh on her arms and shoulders and she thought she was blushing but the kindly passion remained. He took her by the shoulders and she stood almost gasping for breath. Gently he took her head in his hands and he kissed her tenderly, compassionately. Her mouth was half open, quivering as she returned the kiss.

'Good night,' he said stepping back.

She stood there as if mesmerized. 'Nick,' she said finally, weakly. But the 'take me,' 'take me', 'take me' that whirled in the kindly passion would not come out.

'What is it?' he asked gently.

'Good-night,' she said. 'That's all.'

And when he had gone she sat back down on the swing, quivering.

The next morning Nick called Nora early. When she heard his voice she said, 'I'm sorry, Nick. Please don't call again.' And hung up. He called her eight more times that

day and four times she answered and when she heard his voice hung up. The other four times her answering service answered. Late in the afternoon, he drove down to her apartment and by tipping the doorman liberally got through the entranceway and rode the elevator up and knocked. She looked at him through the peephole and told him positively that he couldn't come in. He knocked several more times but she wouldn't answer or speak to him. When he got back home, he called Ellen the Fair and told her he was duty bound, family you know, to take Pat out to dinner but could he meet her or pick her up some place after that, around ten. She said to pick her up at her house. He took Pat out to Los Caballeros for an early steak dinner, much to Old Pete's satisfaction, explaining to her before they left that he would bring her home early as he and Tuttle and Raul were having a meeting over at Raul's regarding the coinoperated machine business. It was really unfortunate that the meeting had to be at night, he told her, but with him going to work at Old Pete's office next day they were forced to make it this evening. She suspected he was lying but didn't mind too much, was glad to go out to dinner, was pleased in a way at this new respect that he had begun to show for her since yesterday, and her kindly passion did not burn as strong.

Ellen immediately sensed Nick's sexual urgency as hard as he tried not to show it. He was so damn stupid, she thought, overly casual. Anyone would be bound to sense it. She gave him a merry run. There were a few things on the scoreboard that hadn't been evened out - like taking Nora to the wedding, for instance, and the fact that he hadn't even called her since coming back from Florida. It took him a couple of hours before he realized she was on to him. Then slowly the enlightenment came and he knew he was paying. Somehow, some way, in some intuitive female way, he said to himself awed once again by female intuitiveness, somehow, some way this bitch sensed I haven't got Nora any more. Well, at least he could have called her. There must have been some excuse he could have fabricated for taking Nora to the wedding, he said to himself.

There were only two things he could do. So he decided

to stand there at the bar at Los Caballeros and take it like a man - when she had her fill she'd come round.

She not only evened the score she tilted the board. Then satisfied and feeling slightly guilty, truthfully slightly shocked by her own viciousness, and slightly disturbed by the guilty, calm, silent way he had taken it, but nevertheless satisfied, and with both of them feeling their drinks, went down to the beach. He didn't get her home until five in the morning. The lights in her house were on and her father was waiting up in his robe:

'I told you, Nick, I wanted my daughter home no later than two-thirty,' he said looking at his daughter very suspiciously.

Nick, thinking quickly, gave him the story that they had gone down to the South Side to hear Lionel Hampton with a group of war buddies who were passing through town. Ellen the Fair verified this in her innocent way, standing there looking very unlike and very hurt, so hurt that after a while her father began to feel very foolish lecturing to Nick - How could any father be suspicious of a daughter like her?

So, after the second lecture of this evening, Nick went home. It was daylight. He knew it would be better not to go to sleep at all. He took a cold shower but half an hour later still felt drained, tired. It was a hell of a shape to be in, he thought, his first day at the office.

'You got in kinda late, didn't you?' Old Pete asked Nick as they settled down on the train.

'Well, you didn't want me to make a pass at Pat Rakis, did you? Besides it looks like you and I are going to have a few secrets - womanwise,' Nick said.

'Yeah,' Old Pete said. So the bitch told him. So the dirty rotten bitch told him. Well, I'll fix her. She'd better watch out now or I fix her good. What reason she have to tell him?

'Well, we're men, son. We gotta have our secrets just like women.'

'I understand, Dad,' Nick said.

Old Pete handed Nick the first part of the paper and kept the sports page for himself. 'It's good we catch this

train,' he said. 'No stops from Evanston on to the Loop,' he said looking at the paper. 'Jesus,' he said as if talking to himself. 'Medwick got four for four yesterday. All extra base hits. That's some ballplayer.'

When they got down to the office, Old Pete said, 'You spend the first couple days in my office with me.'

'What am I supposed to do?'

'You just watch me. Listen to the way I handle things. I show you the statements. How to read them. We got a lunch set up today with Lawrence Green, the banker. You be especially nice to him, hear. He's very important to your future.'

It was a long drawn out day with Old Pete saying every once in a while, 'You see how I handled that, kid? Here, take this over to Charlie Stratos' office and be sure and say, "sir". Show him you got respect. After all, Nick, it don't cost a dime to show a little respect.'

Nick acted it out the best he could. He tried to grasp the meanings of the statements that Old Pete showed him but found it very difficult. At end of day, he was very tired and very low.

He took Pat for a drive that evening. And the night before she left Old Pete gave a dinner for her father and her at the Edgewater and Nick danced with Pat and Yvonne, but mostly with Pat. The next morning Nick and Old Pete drove them to the train and after they had waved them off Old Pete said, 'Well, what do you think of her, son?'

'She's very sweet, dad. The old man's pretty much of a drunk, though.'

'He won't live long, I tell you. I told him myself if he doesn't slow down he won't live long,' Old Pete paused. Then when they were in Old Pete's office he said, 'Nick, I've got experience. The only friend you got in this world is the dollar. The Almighty dollar. You got that and you got everything.'

'Yes, Dad.'

'You marry that girl, Nick, and you're set. Set, I tell you.'

'Marry her!' Nick said. 'I hardly know her.'

'I had a long talk with her father last night. He likes

you, Nick. He says you and his daughter get together he put you right in as manager of all his properties down in Atlanta. He's got eighty-nine pieces of property. Eighty-nine,' he banged his fist down on the table. 'He owns the best corners in the town. It's the opportunity of a lifetime, I tell you. A lifetime.' Down came the fist again.

'What's the girl think about all this?' Nick said.

'She's crazy about you, kid. She told her father, she's crazy about you. Any damn fool could see she's crazy about you. Why you'd be the talk of the town, marrying John Rakis' daughter. Why when he dies you'd be one of the richest Greeks, if not *the* richest Greek, in America. We'd be set.'

'We'd,' Nick said to himself. Certainly there was something in this for Old Pete. There had to be.

'I tell you, son, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. A lifetime.'

Nick began to think it over. That this might be his opportunity to get out of Chicago, to be free of Old Pete. Have his own money and own place. Christ, if her old man did die maybe he could sell out and go to Florida and retire. Have his own boat and fish and travel when he felt like it.

Old Pete was fighting not to show his nervousness, waiting for Nick's answer.

'Well,' Nick said sensing Old Pete's anxiety, 'getting married is a pretty big step. I've got to give it some thought. Some serious thought.'

Old Pete sat there grim faced but smiling inwardly.

'Jesus,' Nick said playing it out to the hilt, 'I never thought about getting married so soon.'

'I tell you, son, you marry that girl and you'll be one of the most respected Greeks in the country. You'll be somebody. Somebody, I'll tell you.'

Somebody, somebody, Nick said to himself staring blankly at the thick pale Moroccan rug which Old Pete had told him at least six times in the last two days hadn't cost a dime.

'You just take it easy, think about it,' Old Pete said. 'You just think about it and you'll know what to do. I

know you're no dumbbell. I know that. You'll be the talk of the town, I tell you.'

'I think I'll go have some coffee,' Nick said.

'Sure, go ahead, kid. But don't forget the meeting. We got a meeting with the Stratos brothers in a half hour in the board room. Now there's going to be *two* Strattons at every board meeting instead of just two Stratos,' Old Pete said proudly. 'Two Strattons,' he said movingly. And Nick got up quickly and left.

Nick's first board meeting had a profound effect on him. Charlie, the Elder, opened it by informing them that they were now ready to negotiate the purchase of two theatres in a small town outside of Indianapolis.

'We're giving them seventy-five hundred for both leases,' Charlie said. 'We should only give them five thousand after all the trouble they caused us. But I think the people in the town might get too mad.'

Nick didn't understand how they could set their own price and asked Old Pete. Old Pete explained how they had originally gone into the town and offered fourteen thousand for the purchase of the two leases and that they had been refused. The people who owned the theatres owned only the two so they, Interstate, told them that if they didn't sell they would build another theatre in the town. The town, Old Pete explained, was not big enough for three theatres so eventually all three would begin to lose money. The independents, without the cash reserves and credit of Interstate, would eventually go bankrupt and they would pick up the theatres through bankruptcy or if the owners were smart, as they were in this case, and saw that Interstate meant business they would sell out.

'Well, how come they don't get fourteen thousand?' Nick had asked.

'Those bastards put us to a lot of trouble,' Charlie said.

'We had to go in there three or four times and have real estate men looking around for property for us. They still thought we didn't mean business. So we even bought a building.'

'A damn good buy we got on that building, too,' Old Pete said.

'Then we go to a contractor, even have plans drawn up to

build a theatre in this building we buy,' Charlie said. 'Then they knew we meant business. Now they can pay us for the trouble they put us to. How do you think we build up this business, kid?'

'Business,' Nick had said. 'Business. For Christ sake that's like hijacking.' He was really very thrown and asked to be excused and left right away and went home.

Old Pete was the first to laugh when he had gone. 'I don't understand these kids,' he laughed. 'They go over there and shoot people up and it doesn't bother them. Then a little good hard business and they get like they want to throw up.'

They all laughed.

'What the hell does he think business is?' Old Pete said.

'He'll catch on,' George the younger said.

'Well, he didn't get the screwings we got when we were kids,' Charlie said in Greek, so that Miss Keith, who was taking the transcript, wouldn't put it down. 'He'll be all right.'

'I tell you,' Old Pete was still smiling, 'I swear I thought he was gonna vomit.' Then his expression changed and he turned to Miss Keith. 'I think we better strike all that business from Nick off the record.'

When Nick got home he told Mary about the meeting. The fact that she didn't seem surprised added considerably to Nick's bewilderment. He didn't see any value in discussing it with Yvonne.

When Old Pete came home he didn't say anything to Nick. Nick decided that maybe his feelings on the tactics of Interstate were due possibly, actually, to his inexperience in business. Old Pete had repeatedly told him he had a lot to learn. He decided to stick it out. At the end of the week he received his pay cheque. It was for thirty-three dollars. Nick went into Old Pete's office furious: 'What the hell is this? For Christ sake I can earn three times this much digging ditches,' Nick said.

'Take it easy, kid,' Old Pete said. He had given Nick every freedom, every advantage in the last few days, hoping that Nick would begin to come around about Pat Rakis. 'I just did that for a front, to make the Stratos think I'm starting you out hard. Hell, I'm gonna take care of

you. Each week outa my pocket. You don't have to worry, kid.'

'I want to feel like I'm earning my money,' Nick said.

'You are. You are. I can see where you're gonna be a hell of help to me, Nick. I could see that a couple days after you were here. You got good ideas. Charlie Stratos said that was a great idea you gave him, to grow our own popcorn. Great. He's looking into it. But, really, Nick, you ought to come to me first when you get an idea. After all, we're blood.'

'I don't see where it makes a hell of a lot of difference,' Nick said. 'We're all the company. If I get an idea I think is good for the company, I think I ought to bring it up. Even if it's to an usher in one of the theatres.'

'Yeah, but I don't want you saying any foolish things. You may think you got a lot of good ideas but maybe I know better. Maybe I could save you a little embarrassment.'

'I don't embarrass easy. Besides, I'm new at this. And bound to make mistakes. But what about the money?'

'What do you think you're worth?' Old Pete asked.

'How do I know?'

'Well, we pay the managers in the theatres fifty dollars on the average.'

'I'm not managing any theatres.'

'I don't think you ought to get more than fifty-five.'

'I quit,' Nick said. 'Hell, I can make more and live better in the Army. And travel besides. And besides I haven't gone up to Fort Sheridan to apply for my discharge.'

Old Pete was thinking about Pat Rakis again. If Nick would marry her he, Old Pete, would take those theatre leases over from the old man. It would be good for over a hundred thousand a year for Old Pete. At least a hundred thousand.

'I mean draw fifty-five from the office,' Old Pete lied. 'And I'll give you another forty-five. How's that?' Old Pete asked. 'And if you do real good I really take care of you at the end of the year. A real bonus.'

'Well, that's better,' Nick said. 'But it seems a damn crime that a son has to come to his father and argue for wages. Christ, I want to work. But no one gives me anything to do.'

'You'll have more to do than you can handle,' Old Pete said. 'Don't worry. You'll have plenty to do.'

'I get my expenses on trips, don't I?' Nick asked.

'Of course, son. We all get that.'

'Well, I guess it's all right,' Nick said in that half-sardonic way of his. Old Pete wanted to get up and belt him right across the face. One hundred a week. Why, he wasn't worth twenty a week to the business. Goddamn punk kid. Spoiled. He must get those crazy ideas from Mary. Where else? Goddamn spoiled punk kid.

By sheer force of will, hard-headed determination, Nick stuck it out. He tried hard in every department he was placed but each morning when he awoke he thought only of when the day would end, when after supper he would drive alone (or sometimes with Yvonne) silently along Sheridan Road. He was not given any responsibility and was treated only as the boss's son. The only relief that first month came when they took a tour of a section of the Indiana theatres. He saw every movie that was in circulation. And in the evening walked alone, lonely, through the unfamiliar surroundings of the small Indiana towns with the farmers gathered under the street lamps or in the village square, or walked alone down by the river (every town had a river) and wondered why he hadn't thought to bring his fishing equipment.

He called Nora but less and less. She still would not speak to him. And on weekends he took out Ellen, usually, and Yvonne went out with Raul. Old Pete kept pressing him about Pat down in Atlanta and Nick wrote her several friendly letters to which she immediately replied. Old Pete and Mary were extremely tolerant of whatever Nick did, but Nick could tell a few hours before they were going to bring up the subject of Pat Rakis. It was, Nick easily discerned, usually about two hours after Old Pete and Mary would have a long conversation in their bedroom and usually took place on Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Nick did not go out much. Mary sensed defeat in him. Old Pete thought he was beginning to grow up finally. But Yvonne felt the mounting tension, and so did Ellen, but in another way. Nick spent many quiet evenings with Old Gus talking about the Bible and about Saint Augustine and other things

that were religious. Nick never asked Old Gus to play his zither anymore and Old Gus felt deeply of Nick's sadness and did his best to humour him. Sometimes Nick would work in the garden with Gus and they would not talk at all.

Pierro's engagement to Marci was announced at the Blackstone Hotel the first week in August. There were only about a hundred select relatives and friends present. After the announcement Nick got very drunk. It was the first time he had been drunk since he had gone to work for Old Pete. He was not visibly drunk but slightly wild-eyed, Yvonne thought. Nick cornered Lou Duck near the bar. He told him he wanted to play a little joke on a friend of his who had a room over at the Plaza. He asked Lou Duck to call up Nora for him and send her over there, say it was a friend of Duck's from Texas. Lou Duck thought that was a fine joke, especially when Nick told Lou how stingy this friend of his was and had a wife and three children in Milwaukee. Lou Duck made the call and Nora said she would be over in a half hour.

Nick had earlier, when he had first begun to get drunk, walked down Michigan to the Congress and gotten the room. He was waiting in the room when Nora knocked. He mumbled, 'Come in.'

She came in, shut the door, then stopped abruptly.

'You lousy Greek bastard,' she said.

'There's my money,' Nick said. 'On the dresser. This is strictly professional.'

She was glaring at him. Her eyes shifted darkly over to the dresser then back to him. She smiled a small slightly twisted smile. 'One hundred for an hour,' she said. 'Two-fifty for the night.'

'There's a hundred there,' he said. 'I can give you a cheque for the rest.'

'I don't take cheques,' she said.

He thought about going downstairs to cash one. He knew the manager but wondered if she might not leave while he was gone.

'We'll try the hour job,' he said, 'then maybe we'll go out and cash a cheque somewhere.'

'That's up to you,' she said. 'You're paying.'

She began to take off her clothes.

'Nora' he said.

'You want to talk,' she said coldly, 'It's all right with me. It's your money.'

'Drink?' he asked her. He was drinking a gin-tonic.

~~'Please,' she said. He made the drink and when he turned around she was on the bed nude. He handed her the drink and began to undress. He got in bed with her. It was like it always had been, before.~~

~~When it was over, he felt terribly shamed and dressed quickly without looking at her and walked from the room without saying a word. He went back to the Blackstone and got hold of Old Pete and took him over into a corner:~~

~~'I'm going to Atlanta tomorrow. I've decided to marry Pat,' he said.~~

Old Pete embraced him and began to cry. 'This is the happiest day of my life.' He kissed Nick several times then made Nick promise not to tell anyone tonight, not even Mary. Old Pete said he would follow Nick down to Atlanta in several days and they would make the announcement from there.

Then Nick went down to Clark Street and got drunk and picked up a whore and woke up in a rooming house with a terrible head and his watch and ring were gone and there was only ten cents in his pocket. He straightened out the best he could and went down to Raul's father's office and borrowed five dollars and went to a barber and got a shave and a massage and a manicure. Then he went home. Old Pete had already gone to the office. Nick called Pat down in Atlanta and said he was coming down and she said it fine. Nick did not know, and Pat did not know, that Old Pete and John Rakis had talked earlier that day.

Nick told Yvonne and Mary where he was going and what for. Mary was very happy and cried. Yvonne could tell Nick's heart wasn't in it and felt sorry for him. He left on the night train.

Chapter Twenty Nine

OLD PETE arrived in Atlanta, at the Rakis estate, three days after Nick. As soon as he got there, he called Nick to his room and had a long talk with him and showed him the ring. When Nick saw the size of the ring he was speechless for a moment, then said: 'It must be at least four carats.'

'Six,' Old Pete said turning it in his hand and admiring it. 'Some stone, eh, kid?' he said. 'A perfect stone.'

Then, after dinner, Old Pete and John Rakis had a long talk while Nick and Pat went to a movie. After the movie Nick gave her the ring. He had never seen anyone as happy as Pat was after he had proposed and given her the ring. She cried and told Nick how much she loved him and how hard she would try to make a good wife for him. They went home and she told her father. Her father had been drinking pretty much when she told him (though he knew) and he cried, and Old Pete cried along with him, and her father held her and told her how hard it was going to be to lose his 'little baby' and told Nick if he ever did anything to hurt her that he would kill him, Nick, with his own hands. 'You gotta take care of her now, Nick,' he kept on saying over and over.

Old Pete phoned the news to his relatives in Chicago at once. He called Mary first to tell her that Nick had given Pat the ring and asked Mary and Yvonne to come right down to Atlanta but Mary said she wasn't feeling well, but that she would send Yvonne on the next train. Old Pete could tell Mary had been drinking quite a bit when he had talked to her.

Old Pete returned to Chicago at the end of the first week. Yvonne returned with him. But Nick stayed on for another week. He and Pat preferred getting married right away but her father wanted to give her a big wedding (bigger, more lavish than the one Old Pete gave for his niece) and set the day for the middle of October. Nick

went around with Old John and looked at all his buildings and properties and the theatres which were leased now to one of the big movie companies on the West Coast. They were the five main houses in Atlanta and the leases expired that December. He didn't owe anything on any of the theatre buildings. Nick was awed with the vast empire that he was soon to take over. Then Nick returned to Chicago. It wasn't that he especially wanted to return but Old Pete said it would look bad for him to stay on down there when he wasn't as yet married and it would look bad to Old John Rakis if he loafed and didn't return to his job at Interstate. So Nick, playing it out to the hilt, went home. He was very surprised when Old Pete and the Stratos brothers and Lou Duck all turned up at the depot to meet him. The Stratos and Lou Duck no longer treated him as if he were some nonentity and Nick was aware of it and it made him feel good. They went down to Greek Town to have lunch and many people came by their table and congratulated Nick and Old Pete but mostly they congratulated Nick and Nick could tell Old Pete didn't like it too much - Nick getting all that attention.

Then he went home. Mary cried and said how happy she was for him and that she could have told him this was going to happen. It was in the stars. But how hard it was going to be for her to lose him. He would never understand, not being a woman, what a mother went through raising her children and just when she felt she was getting to know them, off they went. Nick had a difficult time calming her. After he calmed her, she showed him all the clippings in the Chicago papers about his engagement. The clippings had a profound effect on him. He took them up to his room and read them over and over, realizing suddenly that he was someone of importance. There were all kinds of invitations for him; for lunch, for cocktails, for dinners. He was really quite pleased with it all.

Yvonne came in while he was sitting on his bed reading the clippings. 'Don't let them throw you, boy,' she said.

'I'm gonna be a millionaire,' Nick said.

'God help her if that's the only reason you're marrying her. - God, it must be a disease. First Sophia. Then Marci and Pierro. Then you and Pat. And now Raul and Ellen.'

'Raul and Ellen?'

'Yes,' Yvonne said, 'Raul and Ellen. And don't tell me you can't figure it out.'

'Raul, married to her, will end up just like his father.'

'And what will you end up?'

'A millionaire. I'll make more money than Old Pete ever dreamed of.'

'Money doesn't mean that much to you,' she said.

'Suddenly, it does.'

'You'll never make it, Nick. You haven't got the heart.'

'It's the war,' he said.

'What's the war?'

'All these marriages. People always get married like this in war. Or when the war's ending. It's the only adventure left, getting married. What else is there to do? Tell me.'

'Doesn't anyone have any insides left any more? Can't anyone wait for anything?' she said slightly perplexed. 'Why all this urgency?'

'That's a funny word. I was thinking about that word down in Florida. That's easy. You are born into the age of it and you live it.'

'Then you are like everybody.'

'Yes,' Nick said suddenly, very seriously. 'Yes, it doesn't look like there is any way out of that. I tried. But I don't think there is any way out. At least not for me.'

'You didn't try very hard. How can you say you tried when you've been drinking and whoring the way you have? What about Old Gus, he's found his way out.'

'Gus is different,' Nick said. 'What does Gus think about me getting married?'

'When I told him I thought he would vomit on the spot. He didn't have anything to say. He was brushing one of the goats and he looked at me in a way I've never seen him look then went back to brushing the goats.'

'I must go see him,' Nick said.

'Yes, go see him. See someone you won't be able to fool. Old Pete's been down to his place three or four times since he came back from Atlanta.'

'Going there is like going to church for Old Pete,' Nick said.

Nick was still sitting on his bed and Yvonne got up and shut the bedroom door.

'I found out something a couple of days after you left. I think you ought to know about it,' Yvonne said.

'Well,' Nick said.

'I think Mother's a drunkard.'

Nick didn't say anything for a moment. 'Why?'

'The night you called from Atlanta to tell us the engagement was set I heard some noise downstairs early in the morning. I found Mother passed out on the floor of the living room, a bottle of bourbon spilled on the carpet,' Yvonne said factually. 'Then I thought of some other things in the past, the odd way she acted at times. The next day she locked herself in her room and wouldn't let me in. She talked to me and you could tell from her voice she was drunk.'

'So,' Nick said, 'what do you expect? Living, catering to that old bastard for all these years - it would drive anyone to drink.'

'We've got to help her,' Yvonne said.

'If we can. If she wants to be helped. You've got to be hurt bad from drinking before you'll ever want to help yourself - I know that. A drunkard friend of mine in the Army shot a soldier when he was on a bender one time. I helped to defend him at his courtmartial. I learned a lot from him about drinking. And a lot from the doctors I talked to trying to get information that would be helpful at the trial. Drinking is a sickness,' Nick said. 'I wonder if Old Pete knows.'

'I doubt it,' Yvonne said.

'I don't,' Nick said. 'Old Pete is smarter than you think.'

'Smarter than you think. He's putting up the money for Pierro's office.'

'I thought he would. I'll bet he's got a piece of it, too.'

'Yes,' Yvonne said, 'he's smarter than both of you. And stronger. The two of you and your big plans when you came home. It took him about two months and he's got you both wrapped up in pretty little packages and he's sitting down in his office now fixing up the ribbons.'

'Maybe he's got Pierro wrapped up,' Nick said. 'But not me.'

'We'll see,' Yvonne said.

'We'll see,' Nick said.

He lighted two cigarettes and handed one to Yvonne.

'I feel sorry for Pat,' Yvonne said.

'I feel sorry for those poor bastards at Hiroshima,' Nick said. 'One hundred thousand dead,' he said emptily. 'Do you know how many dead that is? You wouldn't know. You can't visualize the dead until you have seen them. Thirty dead would fill this room. Two hundred fifty dead would fill this house. I mean if you laid the carcasses out side by side you wouldn't be able to walk except on them. One hundred thousand! That's ten times as many as this village we live in. That's twice all the Greeks in Chicago. That's you and me and Mary and Old Pete and Pierro and Marci and Nora and everyone we know multiplied by thousands. All dead! You may think you are *not* responsible for part of that but you are. That is one of the reasons you marry so much while you kill, I think. To make up for it. Now that we have this thing that kills with such effectiveness we are bound to marry like hell. At least I was timely,' Nick said bitterly. 'I got engaged the day the damn thing was dropped.'

'You act like Christ sometimes, bearing the cross.'

'You bear it, too,' Nick said. 'Except you don't know it. You will probably have more babies than anyone. Because you are so damn religious in a way and have such a conscience.'

'I want a lot of babies. I want five.'

'You would,' Nick said.

'And you?'

'It never occurred to me,' he said. 'No, I am not too thrilled with the idea of having a baby. Not for a while, anyhow.'

'It would tie you down, wouldn't it?' she said.

'Yes, it would.'

'I'll never marry a Greek,' she said.

'We'll see,' he said.

'When you spoke about the bomb you mentioned Nora. That's the first time you mentioned her in a long time,' Yvonne said.

'I don't recall having mentioned her. That's over. What

we have might as well be in the rubble pile of Hiroshima.

'No one seems as concerned about this bomb as you.'

'I was thinking about the dead. The bomb - there will be more. Bigger and better ones. I only thought of the dead. Most soldiers undoubtedly thought of the dead. For the people it is excitement. Excitement is the opium of this country. An automobile accident on the road and everyone stops and gawks. Excitement. You cannot sell newspapers without excitement in this country. The atomic bomb - that is excitement,' Nick said. 'Getting married, that is excitement. Becoming a millionaire, that is excitement too.' Christ, what was wrong with him now? WHY was he deliberately trying to hurt *her* now? 'Screwing Old Pete, that is excitement too. And acting uncouth in front of Pierro. There's excitement everywhere, really, if you know how to find it. There is.'

'You're sick.'

'I'm confessing.'

'You should,' she said. Suddenly there were tears in her eyes. 'I'm sorry for you,' she said. 'I really am.' And got up and left the room.

He picked up the clippings and read them over several times, then stretched out on his bed and read them over again, then silently dropped them to the floor. He reached over and from his bookshelf took down the Bible his grandfather had given him and read the inscription in the front:

'To Nick,
All you ever need to know is here.
The Colonel'

How plainly Nick remembered the day his grandfather had given it to him, writing the inscription in the wrinkled old shaky hand. It was only a few weeks before he died. Nick opened the book.

All things are hard: man cannot explain them by words. The eye is not filled with seeing, neither is the ear filled with hearing. What is it that hath been? The same thing that shall be. What is it that hath been done? The same that shall be done. Nothing under the sun is new. Neither is any man

able to say: Behold this is new: for it hath already gone before in the ages that were before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor indeed of those things which hereafter are to come, shall there be any remembrance with them that shall be in the latter end.

Then his eyes skipped across the page:

I said in my heart: I will go and abound with delights and enjoy good things. And I saw this was also vanity. Laughter: I counted error, and to mirth I said: Why art thou vainly deceived?

Then:

And when I turned myself to all the works which my hands had wrought, and the labours wherein I had laboured in vain, I saw in all things vanity, and vexation of mind and that nothing was lasting under the sun.

He threw the book furiously across the room. Got up. Went downstairs and made himself a drink. Mary was in the kitchen talking to the maid and said something to him but he did not answer. He took the drink back upstairs. He paced the room with an animal fury, the drink untouched on his dresser for a long time.

Yvonne knocked and he answered crossly: 'Leave me alone.'

'Daddy's home. It's dinner.'

'I don't give a good goddamn - leave me alone,' he hollered so loudly that Old Pete could hear him downstairs.

'Leave him alone,' Old Pete hollered at Yvonne.

In wisdom - indignation. In knowledge - labour. In love - hate. In violence - relief. He looked at the drink. Now they say in this bomb - energy. Fools - mortals. Fools. Fools. Fools.

He took a book from the shelf, opened it, read a few lines and put it back. He looked at his old copy of *Look Homeward Angel*. Took it down carefully, remembering now there was something there in the first page, something that had to do with everything he had been thinking about. Slowly he opened the book.

*Each of us is all the sums he has not counted:
subtract us into nakedness and night again, and
you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years
ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas.*

Then he read:

*The seed of our destruction will blossom in the
desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain
rock and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slat-
tern because a London cutpurse went unhung. Each
moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The
minute winning days like flies buzz home to death
and every moment is a window on all time.*

My God! My God, he said to himself, thinking now of the newspaper account of the bomb being first exploded on the desert of Nevada.

And read again: 'The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert.'

Then thought of penicillin and sulfa: 'The alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock.'

And thought of what Old Gus had said about: 'Knowing without knowing, winning the race without running.'

Nick closed the book and stood staring out the window, the book in his hand, for a long time. Then, quietly he put the book away and went into the master bedroom and picked up the phone and called Nora.

'I read about it,' Nora said. 'I wish you the very best, Nick.'

'Can I see you?'

She hesitated a moment: 'Yes,'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'I'll be right down,' he said.

'I'll be waiting,' she said without any trace of turbulence, and he remembered how she had touched his hand that night at the wedding when Old Gus was playing the lament in the darkened room with all the old hill people singing.

Gently he hung up the phone.

Chapter Thirty

WHEN you thought about it, with Nick engaged and Nora openly acknowledging to herself that she was in love with him, it was only logical that they should go back together again. There was a time element now, an urgency, and they intended to get all they could in while there *was* still time. They went out practically every night; though, occasionally, in the evening she would *have* to make a 'call'. Then Nick would usually sit in her apartment and read and listen to records until she returned. He thought it odd that he felt no trace of jealousy now about whom she was with, though one night he visualized her being with Old Pete and had a momentary sense of panic, then called home on some pretence to verify his father's whereabouts.

Nick had taken an apartment in an apartment hotel on the near north side after a considerable argument with Old Pete. Pat wasn't due up until middle of September for Pierro's and Marci's wedding. Nick hardly did a thing at the office. He showed up later and later every day and left earlier and earlier. Old Pete was getting very upset about the haggard way Nick showed up and the hours he was keeping. Nick and Nora began to go to the race track a lot. They usually took a table in the clubhouse at Arlington and Nick drank considerably and when he felt the drinks began to gamble rather heavily. After the track they would usually go back to her apartment and clean up and then go out to dinner at some fine restaurant and later go to the Chez Paree or the Empire Room of the Palmer House.

Around the first of September Nora told Nick he was beginning to get a little flabby and they decided to go to the track only every other day instead of every day. Nick began to work out at a health club and on those days they went to the beach.

Nick had not stopped by Old Gus' once since he had

come back from Atlanta. Twice Nora had asked him to take her there but he had made an excuse each time and she knew he didn't want to go. She never pressed him any more. And they hardly ever had an argument. It seemed that now that they knew they had so little time they took great pains to be considerate of each other's feelings. Nora knew he wasn't in love with Pat. And knew, too, not only intuitively but realistically, that he was nothing but a pawn in Old Pete's hand. To her, his future looked as dark as hers and it was as if they both knew that they were soon to die, together, and were having one more fling.

Nora and Nick were at the Chez Paree watching Joe E. Lewis. Nick had dropped eight hundred at the track that day. Lou Duck dropped by the bar to have a drink and saw them sitting at a table and next day called Old Pete and told him. Old Pete paced his office quite a while then called a friend of his down at City Hall. Three days later, on a 'call' at the Fox Hotel, Nora was picked up by the vice squad for 'soliciting' and held on five thousand dollars bail. She was bailed out immediately after the hearing by 'unknown persons' the paper said. The very same afternoon the clerk at Nick's apartment hotel informed him that one of his cheques bounced - 'insufficient funds.' And he realized he was broke. He knew he couldn't go to Old Pete for any money without giving him an explanation. So he went to young George Stratos who was to be best man (it was good business Old Pete and Nick had decided) at Nick's wedding. Nick knew George was a heavy gambler and would understand Nick's predicament. George was only too glad to lend Nick the money and swore he wouldn't say anything to anyone. The truth of the matter was that young George didn't have the twenty-five hundred in cash that Nick wanted and went to Charlie for the money. Charlie demanded an explanation and easily pried it out of George. They both decided, however, it would be better not to tell Old Pete. 'You tell him, Nick.' Charlie said, 'that if he needs any more don't hesitate to ask. In fact, give him three thousand. It ain't gonna hurt none to have him obligated. But make him sign a note, you hear? He'll sign it, don't worry.'

Yvonne saw the papers first and tried 'to keep them

from Mary. But Mary had a phone call and, after the call, demanded Yvonne go get all the papers. Mary cried reading the papers. Nick called home and Yvonne answered.

'Did you see the papers?' Yvonne asked.

'What about them?' Nick asked.

'Didn't you read about Nora?'

'No, what happened?'

'You better get a paper. Your sweet "lady" is about the biggest call girl in town.'

'I found that out some time ago,' Nick said. 'That's why we broke up.'

'You'd better not talk to Mother, she's very upset. The phone's been ringing like mad.'

'Christ,' Nick said, 'I didn't do anything. I didn't know what she was when she went to the wedding with me.'

'No, I don't think you did.'

Nick had a quick drink after he talked to Yvonne. While he was having the drink in the bar of the Field Building, after just having seen George Stratos about the money, Lawrence Green, the banker, walked in. Nick invited him over for a cocktail.

'I'm buying this one,' Green said, 'or I'm not having one. I haven't seen you since you became engaged. One for your good luck.'

'Fine,' Nick said.

'Looks like you're going to be a wealthy man,' Green said.

'I've got nothing against money,' Nick said.

Green grinned. He really liked Nick. Nick never acted it out with him like Old Pete or the Stratos brothers or the other Greeks he did business with.

'I hear she's beautiful, too,' Green said. 'And intelligent. That's a rare combination.'

'You don't believe what the Greeks tell you, now do you?' Nick grinned. 'Well, in this case, they're not padding it. She's got it all.'

'What have you got against the Greeks?' Green asked.

'Not a thing except that they're too Greeky. I'm proud of my Greek blood but I'm American, too. It's funny about Greeks, immigrant Greeks,' Nick said. 'They only trust each other - then they end up screwing each other.'

They're narrow. You don't give a damn who you lend money to, do you? As long as it seems a good risk. I'm sure you don't. I'm sure you wouldn't favour a Jew just because you're a Jew. But there're lots of Jews who would. That's narrowness.'

Lawrence Green laughed his distinguished laugh. 'Your father could learn a few things from you, I think. You should do big things down in Atlanta,' Green said. 'I've a few holdings down there myself.'

'Is there any place you don't have a few holdings?'

'Atlanta's a coming town. We should get together, Nick. I think we can help each other.'

'I'd like to work with you,' Nick said sincerely.

'Why don't we have lunch some day? Just you and me,' the banker said.

'Tomorrow?' Nick said.

'Fine. Why don't you come down to my office? We'll go from there.'

They made an appointment for one o'clock.

'You know that idea about building a hotel on top of an office building -' Green said. 'Your father told me about it.'

'I think it's a hell of an idea,' Nick said. 'But I think there's one thing wrong with it. I think the office building should be on top of the hotel.'

Green studied Nick with his shrewd green eyes for a moment. 'Why do you think that, Nick?'

'One of the most disturbing things that can happen to a hotel guest, in my opinion, is to have a long wait or a long ride on an elevator. It's different in an office. A lot different. Besides, it's not natural to go up twenty flights to eat or drink or banquet. It's premature for this day and age. We're all in too much of a hurry. We have an urgency from the war that will not end abruptly as the war has now ended though the pace hasn't ended with it. Maybe, in years to come when we have much leisure, such a hotel would be all right. That's just my opinion,' Nick said.

'Well, it's a damn sound one,' Green said.

'Well, help me to convince Old Pete of that, will you? He keeps on telling John Rakis what a great idea it is. In fact, if you'd write me a letter, if it wouldn't be too much

bother, that I could show Rakis I'm sure I could get him to put the hotel beneath the office building. The only reason he's building a hotel in the first place is because they won't serve him in the bar of the only decent hotel down there.'

'Well, he picked a good time to build, nevertheless.'

They finished their drink. Nick insisted on buying one. As they started their second drink, Old Pete walked in. When he saw Green and Nick standing there at the men's bar talking and laughing he hesitated a moment, wondering how they had gotten on such friendly terms and what they were talking about. He wanted to join them and stood there for a long while by the entrance watching and, finally, decided it would be better if he left them alone. He decided he'd go down to Lou Duck's to have his after-office cocktail. In fact, he thought he'd take a cab instead of a streetcar. In the cab he wondered what had come over Nick since he had come back from Atlanta. It wasn't right for Nick to meet with Green without even mentioning it to him. Old Pete wondered if maybe Nick wasn't getting some big ideas, getting greedy to get his hands on lots of money and property. It wasn't right, he thought worriedly, for him to meet Green without saying a word. Then he unfolded the paper and saw Nora's picture and read the caption. You don't suppose that kid's getting any ideas - to grab everything for himself?

Nick, having finished his drink and conversation with Green on the proposed five million dollar building, went back to his apartment hotel to pick up the two hundred dollar cheque which had bounced. Then, from a booth, he called Nora. Her line had been disconnected, the operator said. He went by her building and the doorman said she had left a message for him. She could be contacted through Hy at the Four Winds. Nick got a hold of Hy and called Nora at the number Hy had given him. She said she'd meet him at a small bar in the neighbourhood in a few minutes.

She told him she still didn't know what had gone wrong, her protection was all paid up. She did not seem nervous or upset but said that they would be watching her and it would be best if they didn't see each other for a while - at least for a few days. Her lawyer thought they could

straighten the mess out though they would have to reach several people and it would cost considerable cash. Nick told her he was short but he would give her what he had if she needed it. They only had one drink together, then she went on, leaving him with a number where she could be reached.

Nick went back to his hotel. There was a message to call his mother and also Pierro. Nick could never remember Pierro having called him, personally. Nick called his mother. She cried on the phone and told him not to judge the whole world by this terrible thing that had happened and asked him to come home and have a nice home-cooked dinner. Nick said he didn't really feel like coming home. Besides, he had an appointment to meet Old Gus. Then he called Pierro at Marci's. They asked him to come out and have dinner with them but he told them the same thing that he had told Mary but that he would meet them later, if that was all right. They made arrangements to meet at the Edgewater at nine.

Then Nick, having lied twice about going to Gus', went to Gus'.

'Hello, stranger,' Old Gus said and kissed him.

'I've missed you,' Nick said. 'I think I was afraid to come here because, well, because of certain things -'

'You are always welcome, Nickie. It's good you waited until you felt like it, though.'

'Shit. There are some things you should do whether you feel like it or not.'

'Maybe.'

'You coming to my wedding?'

'I would not miss that,' he said. 'Little Joe is already in search of a present for you.'

'You don't approve of my marriage, do you?' Nick said offensively.

'You assume with authority tonight.'

'Do you approve?' he asked in that same offensive tone.

'I don't know,' Gus said. 'I am not God. I cannot solve your problems. You come here and want me to solve your problems. I will if you will let me make them. But you make them, then you want me to solve them. I do not know everything. If you wish to sit down and reason I will

reason with you. But I will not resolve things to your satisfaction. I am not that lazy. Even though I do not work I am not that lazy.'

'I'm sorry, Gus.'

'All right,' Gus said. 'Drink some wine with me.'

'No, ouzo, please.'

'All right, ouzo. Have you eaten?'

'Yes.'

'You have not eaten. Why don't you say you don't want to eat? Are you afraid someone will call you a drunkard?'

'Yes.'

'That's the first honest thing you have said since you have come in.' He stood there staring at Nick and then the wrath slowly vanished from Old Gus' eyes and he smiled.

'Christ, it's been a long day,' Nick said finally, at ease.

They had two drinks together and Nick did not mention anything about Nora as he had planned driving there. Nor did they talk about his impending marriage to Pat. They laughed about some of the fine things that happened on the fishing trip and Old Gus told Nick that he had just about finished the composition of his Greek-American cowboy song. And reminded Nick that he had promised to help compose the lyrics for it. Then, with the sun setting in the west, Old Gus took Nick outside the shack and showed Nick the tyres he had put at varying distances on the ground and got out his spinning tackle and cast, using each tyre as a target. It was hard for Nick to believe he cast so well and they had a contest and Gus put more of the weights into the tyres than Nick.

When Nick got back to his hotel, there was a note from Nora in his box. She had gone to New York upon advice of her counsel, the note said, until things quieted down. She would let Hy know how and when he could reach her.

Chapter Thirty One

WHEN Pierro returned to the table, he was surprised Nick had gone. 'I swear he'll disgrace us all one of these days.'

'Perhaps,' Marci said distantly.

Then they finished their drink and Pierro finished the drink that Nick had ordered and not touched and took her home. After he left her off at the Evanston house, he stopped in several bars, then before he went to bed he reached behind one of his bookshelves and took out a pint and drank half of it, then, half-drunk, went to sleep. The next morning he stole surreptitiously off to the west side and had another Wassermann test. The Wassermann showed up positive and, for the fourth time in the last month, the technician assured him that the cause of the test being positive was Pierro's malaria. Anyone, he had said, who had had malaria as much as Pierro was more than likely to have a positive Wassermann, at least for a few years after he had returned stateside.

Pierro was not satisfied. He thought about it all the time. Lately he had been losing a little of his hair and he had heard that that was one of the symptoms. He had examined his body over and over for sores ever since he had started to drink heavily. He had felt, at first, that drinking a lot, dissipating, was bound to bring it out if it was there. He had too much pride to go to a reliable, established physician - suppose his name was placed on the public health lists for being syphilitic? His career, his marriage, would be ended. What would he do on his wedding night? Over and over these thoughts penetrated him as he drove down to the office.

Around noon he went down to the University of Chicago library and in a shadowy, far away corner read more on the disease. Then returned to supervise the work at his office. •

As the wedding day approached, he grew more and more

tense. He was never irritable in public but around the house suffered states of severe depression and often would have tantrums, hollering at his little-old-bent-from-arthritis mother about a button that hadn't been sewn on properly, or a pair of pants that hadn't been returned from the cleaner.

The wedding was to be a small affair. The Prescotts did not believe in large, showy weddings. Pat arrived a week before escorted by her father. Her father stayed at the Edgewater but Pat stayed with the Strattons in Winnetka. There were parties every night and the Daily News said it was to be one of the social events of the season and wrote a long article on the history of the Prescott family in Chicago, then wrote a short article on Pierro and all the architectural honours that he had won. Pierro grew more irascible around home with each day.

The wedding was held early the morning of the fifteenth informally at the Presbyterian Church and, a little after noon, formally at the Greek Orthodox Church, the reception following at the Blackstone. There were only about one hundred relatives and friends. The Greeks, meeting for the first time the old distinguished Chicago names, were subdued, actually awkward in their conduct, Nick thought.

The bride and groom got away early for their weekend up in Wisconsin. After they left, Old Pete invited a select few of his Greek friends to see the show in the Blackstone's main room. You would never have taken Old Pete for one of the Greeks at that wedding. Nick and Pat left early and went over to the Sherman to see Benny Goodman. The next day Old John Rakis met with Pete and Nick. John said that he wanted to give Nick and Pat something nice, initially, for a wedding present and suggested buying them, or building them, a house.

'Well, I appreciate that,' Old Pete said. 'And so does Nick but I'm sure they won't need anything elaborate.'

'Looka here, Pete,' John Rakis said, 'I worked like hell. Now I want my daughter to have the best. I spend fifty-sixty thousand for a house for them. And furnish it besides. After all, Nick's gonna be an important man down there. I want him to live important, like he's important.'

The Rakises left two days after Pierro and Marci's wedd-

ing, New York bound to wardrobe Pat. Several days after that Hy called Nick and told him Nora was back in town. They started seeing each other again. Nora had moved to a new apartment a block from the one she had and changed her number. They did not go any place where they could be seen, however.

Nora 'sneaked' an occasional call. She was in much more trouble than she had at first believed possible, she told Nick. In fact, she might have to go to jail. Nick borrowed another thousand dollars from Georges Stratos and gave it to Nora one day saying it was all he could do now but hoped it would help. Nora still had, after attorney's fees, over twelve thousand in the bank vaults (she had had a very succesful trip to New York professionally) but nevertheless took the ten hundred dollar bills from Nick.

About two weeks after Pierro's wedding Nick had a letter from Pat. It was not in her hand. She was in the hospital, a virus infection, and wondered if maybe he would come down for a few days. Nick did not show the letter to Old Pete but called the hospital. She was not in serious condition, her nurse told him, but talked of him incessantly. That evening around six when Nora returned from the beauty parlour (she had been to her lawyers too) she seemed in a frenzy. She went into her bedroom while Nick made a drink in the living room. She came out in her robe.

'Well, it looks like I'm going to get married, too,' she said with a vengeance.

'Married?'

'Married. It's the only way I can get out of it. If I marry that bastard that put the pinch on me he won't testify.'

Nick thought it was amusing but knew better than to laugh.

'What does he think about this?'

'I've been working on him. Seeing him. He wants to marry me. Otherwise I'm going up for six months, maybe a year.'

'I'll bet he'll pay,' Nick grinned.

'You're right he'll pay,' she said frenziedly. 'He'll think he's going to bed with a newspaper. All the rotten bastard wants to do is beat me anyhow.'

'Have you let him?'

'Yes, I've let him. You goddamn right I've let him,' Now Nick saw for a second how she resembled the oil painting that hung over this new, not as ornate, fireplace. 'I'm not going to be locked up anywhere, ever again. And you know something else I found out? Do you know? Do you know why I'm in this mess? Do you? Do you?' she almost screamed. 'Don't sit there looking so stupid. It was your father who got me in this mess. Old Pete. He found out we'd been going around together and he used his influence down at City Hall to have me dumped.'

It took a few seconds for the vast reality of it sink in.

'Pete,' Nick said. 'Pete.'

'Yes. Pete. Pete. Pete,' she raged.

'That dirty sonofabitch,' he said as if in a daze. 'The rotten bastard. I wonder where he's at. I wonder.' Quickly he got up off the sofa and went over to the phone and called home. Mary said she was expecting him any minute. Nick hung up. 'Will you be here?' Nick said to Nora with a wild urgency. 'Will you be here when I get back?'

'I'll be here, Nick,' and put her hands to her head and began to cry. Nick took one huge drink of scotch from the bottle. Driving north he tried to think about everything except what he would tell Old Pete. He tried to think about the fishing trip, the war, his young days in Wisconsin, his grandfather. He didn't want to lose any of the fury and vengeance that was in him thinking about what Pete had done to Nora. He drove very fast and stopped at Howard Street and had three more drinks and took the west route home and had three more drinks. He did not feel the drinks but the fury, the rage, the fierceness increased and increased and he was trying to pace it so that it reached its zenith when he reached home.

It did. Old Pete was eating when Nick stormed in, wild eyed, his face flushed, his fists clenched, his shoulders swelling from the deep enraged breath.

'I want to talk to you,' Nick said to Old Pete.

'You been drinkin',' Old Pete said.

'I said I want to talk to you. Right now.'

'Who the hell you think you're talking to?'

'Unless you want your dirty linen washed right here in

front of Mother and Yvonne, I'd get my rotten double-crossing ass right out of that seat.'

'Nick,' Mary said, 'don't you dare talk to your father like that.'

Yvonne was shaking with fright.

'I'll handle this, Mary,' Old Pete said. 'I'll handle this punk kid.' He got up.

'It's the war,' Mary mumbled. Yvonne got up and went over and put her arms around Mary.

Nick stormed upstairs, Old Pete following.

'You shouldn't excite your mother like that,' Old Pete said. He was thinking that somehow Nick must have found out about the deal he, Old Pete, had made with John Rakis.

Nick stood there, his hands on his hips, in the master bedroom glaring at his father. 'I ought to kill you,' he said slowly, deliberately.

Old Pete reddened and took two steps forward and slapped Nick hard across the face. Nick took his father's neck in his hands and began to squeeze. Old Pete, feeling Nick's enraged strength, stared at him with round, horrified eyes. 'Nick,' his father managed to blurt. 'Gheece!'

Nick relaxed his grip. 'Don't you dare ever lay a hand on me again. Now I'm telling you two things. One: You get Nora out of that mess that you got her in. If you don't I'm going to tell Mother. Two: You keep your rotten money-mad fingers out of Atlanta. Atlanta's mine. And you're not getting a dime out of it. Not one dime.'

Old Pete was shaking. He put his hand to his chest.

Nick walked out and as he touched the hall landing he hollered towards the dining room: 'The old man's having one of those twobit heart attacks. You'd better get up there.'

And Nick got into the car and drove back to Nora's. Before he went up to Nora's, he called Yvonne and told her he would explain the whole thing to her some day and how was Old Pete. In bed resting, Yvonne said, he was all right.

Then Nick went up to the apartment. 'Don't worry about a thing. And don't put up another dime. Old Pete's getting you off.'

'You don't know Old Pete,' she said.

'And you don't know my mother,' Nick said. 'What kind of position you think Old Pete would be in if I told my mother he was whoring? He wouldn't have two minutes of peace the rest of his life.'

Nora began to laugh. Then Nick joined in.

'Let's go on the town and the hell with everyone,' Nick said. 'The Chez, the Buttery, everywhere.'

'Yes,' she said with that turbulence in her voice now. 'Let's.'

'But not this second,' Nick said.

'No,' she said. 'Not this second.'

When Nick got down to the office next day, Old Pete wasn't there. His secretary said he was very ill and Nick should go home immediately. When Nick arrived at the Winnetka house, he passed the doctor on the porch. He had been the family doctor for years and they shook hands and made their greetings:

'His heart?' Nick asked.

'No, it seems to be more of an emotional condition,' the doctor said. He was very old, and tall, over six-five, with kind, tired grey eyes. 'His blood pressure's up. He's terribly worried about you.'

'You don't believe that crap after all these years.'

'I've always admired and liked your father, Nick.'

Nick grinned that half-sardonic grin and went upstairs. His mother met him in the hall: 'Your father isn't well at all.'

'I know what's wrong with him,' Nick said. 'I just talked to the doctor.'

'Don't do anything to upset him, please, Nick,' she said.

'He's so terribly worried about you.'

Old Pete had been reading a paper but when he heard Nick in the hall he put the paper down and sat there, a grey dismal look on his face. Nick came in:

'How do you feel?' Nick said.

'Not so good, son. Not so good at all. I think it's my heart again.'

Jesus, but he could act, Nick said to himself.

'I know you weren't yourself last night,' Old Pete said. 'I know the war upsets you boys.'

'Look, Dad, what I said about Nora sticks. Whether you're sick or not. I'm leaving town for a few days and I'd better know that you're going to straighten that mess out. Or, I'll go tell Mother right now,' Nick said. 'I'm not kidding.'

'You're rotten,' Old Pete said. 'Rotten. You would do something like that to your mother, wouldn't you?'

'You did it.'

'You can't cheat life, Nick. I know,' he said tiredly as if he were really very sick. 'You gotta pay for your sins someday. There's no way out, Nick.'

'Pat's sick. In the hospital. Not serious. She asked me to come down. I'm going.'

'When did you hear this?'

'Yesterday.'

'Why didn't you say something.'

'I'm marrying her. Not you.'

'My God, Nick,' he said making the sign of the cross, 'we're your mother and father. Your blood. The least we could do is send something nice. What's wrong with her?' he asked in a new not-tired-at-all voice.

'Virus or something. I called the hospital. She's fine. But she wants to see me.'

'I'm glad you're going, son. Glad,' he said dramatically. 'You know you're all I've got. All.' His eyes began to mist.

'Yes, Dad.'

'I could go any day now Nick. Then it will be up to you. I need you,' he said with such pathetic conviction that Nick reached over and patted his shoulder. 'A man my age can go any minute.'

'Don't worry about a thing, Dad. Everything will work out.'

'I forgive for what you did last night - to your own father.'

'I won't forgive you unless you straighten that mess out,' Nick said.

God, but he can be cold, Old Pete thought. Ruthless.

'I gotta few things I want you to take care of for me down at the office. I probably won't be down for a few days. You're the only one I got, Nick.'

Nick went over and sat down on the chaise longue and Old Pete told him what he wanted him to do. Christ, Nick said to himself, an office boy could do what he asked.

Then right before he left: 'Stop by the church,' Old Pete said. 'Light a candle for your happiness in your marriage. Take the money out of my pocket. A five.'

'I've got money,' Nick said.

'You can't use your own money to light a candle for your own happiness,' Old Pete said. 'You know better than that, Nick.'

'Yes, Dad,' Nick said. He had no intention of stopping by the church in the first place. But he went into Old Pete's pocket and took the five.

'I can count on you fixing up this mess you made?' Nick asked.

'I get on it first thing.'

'All right,' Nick said. 'I'm sorry, Dad. But it seemed the only way to deal with a rotten trick like that.'

'I was only trying to protect you, son. My God, suppose you'd of become diseased. I know those kind of women. I've had experience with those kind of women. I was only trying to protect your interests.'

'I know that,' Nick said.

'Come over here, son,' Old Pete said. Nick came over. Old Pete took Nick's head in his hands and kissed him and began to cry. 'Take care of yourself, son. You're all I got,' he said pathetically.

'Goodbye, Dad,' Nick said. 'I hope you feel better. I'm sure you're not as sick as you think. I talked to the doctor. God bless you.'

Old John Rakis met Nick at the station in Atlanta. He kissed Nick on the cheek and Nick smelled that he had been drinking quite a bit and could see his eyes were very bloodshot. They went directly to the hospital in his chauffeured limousine. Old John cried once on the way as he told Nick how sick his good 'little baby' Pat was. It was a very pathetic, thwarted cry; the cry of one who could not perceive exactly what his daughter's condition was and had a basic mistrust for those who cared for her.

She smiled her sweet, innocent smile when she saw Nick

and her eyes misted. In the bed, drawn, having lost considerable weight, and with her eyes all shining, she looked like a little girl of thirteen or fourteen, Nick thought. His heart went out to her and he kissed her and sat down by the edge of the bed.

She said she was feeling much better and how happy she was that he had come, now she knew she would get better quicker. Nick held her hand and told her not to worry and joked about all his experience in hospitals. When his time was up, he went out into the corridor and talked to the doctor. She wasn't in any danger the doctor assured him, though they had been worried about her at first. Nick went home with Old John Rakis. He lied to the old man about his medical knowledge but convinced him that there wasn't anything to worry about. Old John drank a lot before dinner and cried again and said how much he missed his 'little baby' and what a good boy Nick was to come down so quick, God would bless him. After dinner he went to sleep in a parlour chair.

Nick took a walk. Walking he couldn't get the picture of Pat as she was in the hospital bed from his mind. Walking, he knew somehow that he would never be able to marry her. She deserved better than him and the wild way he was, he told himself. He would bring her only misery, he felt. He didn't know how he could tell her though. More than anything he didn't want to hurt her, but to hurt her a little now and save all that misery through the years would be better. He would wait, he decided, until she was out of the hospital. Until he had gone back to Chicago and they had been away from each other for a while, then he could write her and explain.

He stayed five days, then she was moved home. Both she and Old John wanted him to stay longer but he said he was needed at the office, really he had to get back. When he kissed her goodbye in her bed, he felt strangely that somehow she knew she would never see him again and there were tears in her eyes.

On the way home, he decided he wouldn't tell anyone for a while. Perhaps, if he could manoeuvre it, first get the wedding postponed for a month. The more time the easier it would be on her, he felt. He stayed in his roomette the

entire trip. He did not consider any of the circumstances that would result from his not marrying her. He told himself over and over how foolish he had been to ask her in the first place. And wondered what was wrong with him - everything he touched he seemed to destroy.

Chapter Thirty Two

THE deterioration of a family when the family has bonds is a tragedy to witness, Old Gus thought. All these past three weeks since Nick had returned from Atlanta and Pierro had returned with his bride, Marci, the signs had grown stronger. First Nick had come to the shack to tell him that he was not going to marry Pat. Then Yvonne had come to speak to Old Gus of the silent, morbid way Nick had been acting. Then Marci had come to talk about Pierro, the irascible way he had been since they were married and his insistence that for the present, at least, they have no children. She had referred again and again to his temperament as artistic and Old Gus knew that Pierro had not told her of the syphilis that was in his family.

Old Pete had just left and now Old Gus was sitting on the edge of his bunk. It was late in the day, the first truly cold grey day of September. In the afternoon before Old Pete had come, he had raked a portion of the lot and the fire from the leaves and the debris still burned outside and he could smell the scent of burning pinewood and the air was fresh cool, the first true fall air. The tragedy was, he was thinking, that the separation of a family was always *thought* of as a deterioration. Yet men knew that change was the essence of growth. Family love, as any love, could be destructive. The tragedy was the family did not understand. Old Gus remembered:

*If thou ask thy self Quis Ego, what am I? and
beest able to answer thy self, why now I am a man
of title, of honour, of place, of power, of posses-*

sions, a man fit for a Chronicle, a man considerable in the Herald's office, go to the Herald's office, the sphere and element of honour, and thou shalt finde those men as busie, about the consideration of funerals, as about the consideration of Creations, thou shalt finde that office to be as well the Grave as the Cradle of Honour, and thou shalt finde in that office as many Records of attainted families and escheated families and empoverished and obliterate families as of families newly erected and presently celebrated. In what height soever any of you that sit here, stand at home, there is some other in some higher station than yours that weighs you downe.

Nick was forced to borrow another fifteen hundred dollars from George Stratos, though he had, because of the expense involved, given up his apartment. Old Pete kept urging Nick and Pierro to make a trip to Atlanta together so that Pierro could discuss the new five million dollar building with old John Rakis. Pierro's office was now complete and the only two commissions he had prospectively were the ones for the building and for Nick's house. He kept calling Nick, saying that they really ought to go down and at least find a piece of property for Nick's house so that he could begin preliminary plans. Nick avoided both Old Pete and Pierro on one pretence or another. Old Pete began to feel for the first time that he wasn't in complete control of the situation, and Pierro was worried. He was furnishing his apartment on the near north side and had rent to pay at his office. Too, he had had a violent argument with Old Pete because he had refused to do some simple designs for an Interstate theatre. The office had cost considerably more than he had anticipated and since the argument with Old Pete, Old Pete had reneged on paying off several creditors he had promised he would. They were, in fact, living off Marci's income. Marci suggested that she take some radio work to augment it but he refused to let her. Old Pete went to see Gus almost every day trying to get Gus to persuade Nick to go to Atlanta with Pierro. The wedding date was now only three weeks away. Nick

couldn't figure out any way to postpone it and Gus kept telling him that he must do it soon if he was going to. He went out with Nora but only a couple of times a week. She was very busy. Needed the money, she said. When they went out, they went to Calumet City a lot and Nick gambled. Old Pete was wondering if it was Nora who was making Nick act this way. Nora did not seem the same lately to Nick. She was more and more remote. Nick thought it was probably because she was underlyingly afraid of Old Pete. Nora's denial augmented Nick's desire in a wild, frenetic way. Sometimes after a night with her he would come into the office with such an obvious contempt for his father that Old Pete would be forced to avoid him, badly as he wanted to reach him.

Old Pete tried to get Mary to talk to Nick but Mary only sympathized with him which caused Old Pete additional irritation. Mary said that there wasn't anything wrong with Nick, he was nervous from the war, Old Pete should be more considerate and have more faith.

Nick talked to Pat several times. He was sure now she sensed their marriage would never go through. Finally Pierro, pressed by his creditors, went to see Old Pete. Old Pete said that by now Pierro should be on his own. He had two commissions, part of his job as an architect was to sell his work. If he couldn't get Nick to act, that wasn't his, Old Pete's, fault. He blamed it all on Nick. Pierro said he would go into Nick's office and talk with him. Nick was reading *Time* magazine when Pierro came in.

'Surprise,' Nick said lazily when he saw him.

'I think we ought to get together on this Atlanta business,' Pierro said.

Nick looked at him for a long moment.

'There isn't going to be any Atlanta business,' Nick said. 'You might as well know.'

'What do you mean?' Pierro said.

'I'm calling off the marriage, that's what.'

'How long have you known? Since you came back?'

'Yes.'

'Don't you think you could have been decent enough to to say something then?' Nick sensed the disappointment and defeat in Pierro's voice.

'I suppose,' Nick said. 'For you, I'm sorry. But I just can't go through with it.'

'You're detestable,' Pierro said in an ugly way.

'You wouldn't understand,' Nick said as Pierro walked from the office.

Nick waited now for Old Pete's secretary. But Old Pete himself came in grey-faced. 'Come in my office,' Old Pete said, his voice quivering. Nick followed him into his office. Old Pete sat down behind his desk. Nick could see that his hands were trembling.

'It's true,' Nick said. 'I'm not going through with it.'

'You bum. You dirty rotten bum.'

'I can't help it,' Nick said. 'I can't.'

'You destroy everything you touch. Everything! You disgrace your family. You break Pierro's heart. You hurt the girl. My best friend's daughter. You're killing your mother. You're nuts! Crazy! Disgrace,' he practically screamed, his fist coming down on the desk. 'Disgrace.' Then, suddenly, he was swearing loathingly at Nick in Greek.

Nick turned and walked out of the office. He went home and told Mary. Mary cried. Then Nick went upstairs to write Pat a letter. Mary went into the kitchen and took two large shots and rinsed her mouth with Lavis. When Nick finished writing the letter, he called George Stratos down at the office and told him. George went and told Charlie right away. Charlie smiled. It was the first time in years George had seen Charlie smile. Yvonne heard about it from Mary and went upstairs and called Nick a dirty bastard, then said she was sorry, was there anything she could do for him. After Nick had talked to Yvonne, he went down the back stairs and around the house and drove down to Gus'. He sat on the edge of the bunk in the shack and told Gus.

'You must go your way, Nick,' Old Gus said reassuringly. 'I do not think in the eyes of God you have committed any great sin. What will you do?'

'I don't know.'

'You have spent what money you have?'

'Yes.'

'You should have some money. As the son you should have that anyhow. In all these years, I have never asked your father for anything. I will ask him for money for you.'

'I don't think it will do any good,' Nick said. 'But thanks, Gus.'

'The last weeks have not been so much fun for you. Come. We will go down to Greektown and get Little Joe and drink and dance. Tonight we should do that.'

Nick hesitated a moment. 'Yes, let's.'

They went down to Little Joe's diner. It was crowded. Old Gus went down around the counter and spoke to Little Joe. Little Joe told everyone to hurry up and eat; he was closing. He went into the kitchen and brought out some ouzo and poured a glass for Gus and Nick. Then began to prod his customers to hurry up and get out and began to clean up the range.

They went to a coffee house first.

'What's this business, Nickie?' Little Joe asked. 'What's this high business this old one said is so important?'

'Nick, I think, goes away soon,' Old Gus said. 'Is it not right we gather?'

'You are not marrying,' Little Joe said. 'Is that it?'

'Yes.'

'Ha! Old Gus said you would not marry, probablies.'

'Probably,' Nick said, grinning.

'Probilies,' Little Joe tried but in vain. 'What will you do?' Little Joe asked.

'He does not know. I think he should have money.'

'Yes, he should have money. The son of Old Pete Stratton should have monies,' Little Joe said. 'Maybe now Old Pete will know that monies will not buy everything.'

'He won't give me money,' Nick said.

'You have monies,' Little Joe said. 'For years, since he has been bankrupt he has carried the stocks in your name, my name, your sainted mother's name, your good sister's name. Did you not know?'

'I have signed many things for him. I don't know.'

'We will get you money,' Little Joe said. 'Old Gus and I will get it for you. But what will you do?'

'He does not know. How would he know now? If he has

money he will do one thing. Without it he will do another. He is not like us - always without money.'

'I have money,' Joe said proudly, pressing his hand to his money belt.

'Money,' Old Gus said.

Nick was laughing.

They drank and sang and danced and went from place to place. Nick got home at five in the morning.

He came down to breakfast around noon. Mary drank coffee while he ate in the breakfast nook. She had had a terrible time with Old Pete last night, she said. He was disgraced, he felt. He had taken a bag when he left this morning and was going to Hot Springs with Lou Duck for a few days.

Then Nick told Mary he was going away, on his own, that he would like some money. Mary, too, thought he should have it. 'Your father should do something for you while he's still alive,' she said. 'What is the pleasure in doing it for your own when you are dead? I wish you every happiness, son. In a way, I'm very proud of you.'

Nick felt choked up and did not answer for a moment.

'I don't know where I'm going,' he said finally.

'You'll find what you want,' she said in that secure way that mothers have of saying it, and making you believe it, because *they* want to believe it so badly, and because *you* want to believe it so badly.

Nick told Mary that Old Gus was going to approach Pete for him and Mary said she thought it was a fine idea, then asked Nick if he would drive her to Evanston so she could shop. He said he would be glad to and she told him to be sure and put on a sweater, it was a little chilly.

Nick asked where Yvonne was and Mary said she had gone shopping with Ellen, Ellen was buying her wardrobe for her impending marriage to Raul. Before Nick left for Evanston with Mary, he called Nora and told her he had broken the engagement. She seemed very casual about the breaking of his engagement and was very busy, she needed the money very badly she said, and they made a date for two nights later.

Yvonne too was very busy, now that Old Pete was away, attending parties for Ellen and Raul. It was lonely for

Nick when he was not with Nora, waiting for Old Pete to return. Two days before Old Pete returned, Nick came back from a walk on the beach around four. Mary was paralyzed drunk, was crying, was maudlin, threw her arms around Nick and begged him not to go away. Yvonne called the doctor and he came over and gave Mary a sedative. Yvonne said she was disgusted with the whole mess and went off in a convertible with a young naval officer Nick had never seen before. She hadn't even waited for the officer to come to the door but walked rapidly towards his car when it pulled up.

Nora looked very bad that night. She had lost considerable weight lately and there were dark circles under her eyes and her eyes seemed yellowish and large shiny bright as if she were sick in some way. Nick told her that he thought she was working too hard but she laughed at that. She, who had always drunk so well, drank hardly at all this night but got very sick and Nick took her home and held her head while she vomited. She was terribly sick but wouldn't let him call a doctor. He stayed up most of the night listening to the way she breathed but finally he went to sleep and when he got up she was fine, it seemed. She kidded him about his thinking he was going to get any money off Old Pete.

'I *must* be screwed up to think that,' he was forced to laugh at himself. She agreed. They were having one of their homey breakfasts. She hardly ate at all. He wondered if she had TB or cancer and asked her seriously if she wouldn't go see a doctor. 'A week in the Florida sun and I'll be fine,' she said.

So they sat there placidly, it seemed, having their coffee. Each, it seemed, in his own way (tentatively at least) sated. Yet, it seemed, not sated of each other. She had been so very casual about the breaking of his engagement. She was never conscious of it giving her pleasure. She was not aware, nor was he, that her attitude towards him had changed. But the last two times they had been out she had reprimanded him about his gambling and drinking and the way he spent money, but it was in such a nice way, and he seemed to take pleasure in this new interest she had in him. And she was not aware, nor was he, that his attitude towards

her had changed. They had been to bed only once since he had picked her up last night and now in the morning there didn't seem to be any desire and it seemed that he had known her always.

She kissed him oddly when he left a little while later. It was such a tender kiss, a kiss of longing it seemed, and she had never before held his head in her hands when she had kissed him. She said, 'Goodbye, Nick,' oddly too, he thought walking to his car in the grey September morning. He wondered if she was sick, was going to die. He had a strange feeling that he would never see her again but as he drove home the feeling vanished. But he did not call her that afternoon as he said he would. And when he called the next day the answering service said they had a message for him: she had gone to Florida. That was all.

He went out to the bar at Los Caballeros and stood there from five until twelve. Yvonne and her naval officer, and Tuttle and Tuttle's brid-to-be, Raul and Ellen, and Raul's father all walked in at twelve. Nick was very drunk. He was introduced to Yvonne's naval officer and made some kind of sarcastic remark to him, and Yvonne whispered something to the officer and they left Nick and went off to dance. Louis, the bartender, said it would be best if Nick went home and called him a cab. Raul's father and Louis took Nick out to the cab, Nick mumbling something about 'finalities of finalities of finalities.'

The next day when the mail came there was a package addressed to Nick from Atlanta. It was the ring. No note, just the ring. Nick took it right downtown to a jewellery store and sold it for three thousand two hundred and fifty dollars, two thousand less than Old Pete had paid for it. When Old Pete arrived and heard the ring had been returned he asked Nick for it. Nick said he had sold it. He and Old Pete had a violent argument over the ownership of the ring. Old Pete grabbed a kitchen knife and Mary thought he was going to kill Nick and threw herself between them and fainted. Yvonne became hysterical. Old Pete left the house with Yvonne's screams ringing in his ears, and Nick trying to revive his mother, and went to the Drake and took a room for the night.

The next day the Stratos brothers informed Old Pete

that Nick owed Interstate over five thousand dollars. They had a terrible argument, Pete contending that the Stratos had no right to lend Nick the money without his consent, that he, Old Pete, didn't owe it, Nick owed. They said Nick had stock in the company and if he couldn't pay it back it should come out of the value of Nick's stock. Old Pete argued with them in Greek for over two hours and finally stormed out and went down to the shack to see Old Gus. He told Old Gus all his troubles and, when he was done, Old Gus said, 'I have never asked a thing of you. Now I am going to ask of you a favour.'

'Whatever you want, Gus,' Old Pete said.

'I want you to give Nick money,' Old Gus said and saw the red come into Old Pete's face. 'Little Joe and I have a good idea of your worth. We want you to give him fifty thousand dollars.'

Old Pete ranted and raved and swore at Old Gus and said he was crazy with his old age, Nick would never get a dime, not a goddamn dime from him ever, the rotten punk son-of-a-bitch. When he had talked himself out, Old Gus very soothingly told Old Pete that, according to the study he had made of Old Pete's finances, Old Pete had violated the bankruptcy laws and if the government ever found this out Old Pete was in serious trouble. Old Pete knew that Old Gus did not fool and walked from the shack with head bowed and went home to Mary and up on the chaise longue cried pitifully and told her how his whole family that he had worked so hard for had turned upon him. In her arms, he was like a scared child and she listened to him and gave him brandy and took his pulse and patted him and read to him from the horoscope book about what a long life he had ahead of him, and the great success in store for him, everything would be fine. She gave him a sedative and he went to sleep exhausted.

Nick saw Old Gus that night and Gus told him he was going to get the money and suggested Nick move into a hotel until it could be arranged.

'That is much money,' Old Gus said. 'Money is to be used to the advantage of things, remember that, Nick. Your father owes you nothing now, nor you him. Go your way.'

'Should I give some of this money to Pierro? I know he needs it bad.'

'If money is going to be used to pacify your guilts, you are making no better use of it than your father. Go back to work for him if that is what you want money for. That is all I can tell you.'

'I think I understand,' Nick said. 'I'll see you before I go.'

'Go slow,' Old Gus said, 'until you see a rent and when you see the sky, some day, go like hell for it.'

Chapter Thirty Three

THE next morning Nick drove far out into the country near St. Charles in the Fox River Valley. He drove with the top down in the crisp fall morning along the twisting, turning, rolling little road that lay close paralleling the river. The sun reflected through the slight morning mist from the river onto the trees that were all gold, yellow, red now in the fall. And already the county workers were burning the leaves along the road. On the river there were ducks and several boats and men fishing in the boats. When he was a small boy he had fished for sunfish and catfish on this river in the very same boats. He had no idea why he had driven out here so early in the morning. Finally he had pulled off the road near the river, near a roadside table. He sat on a log near the table and looked out at the river.

Objectless anxiety in the present, he thought, and a future of sacrifices that amounted to nothing. Or was it sacrifice that made him know he must go away. Is it sacrifice or was it truly because I have the great vanity and believe now that I am ostracized from this society in which I have been raised, that those very persons whom I consider stupid and ignorant and base will be frowning upon me. Is it because of that? Or because I am too weak to face them? I have committed no crime yet in a way I have

been made to believe so. Was there really anything in this world that we were not *forced* to do?

I mean, he asked himself, am I going away because I want to or because I am *forced* to. And if I should choose to stay would it be because I really want to stay or because I am *forced*. And if it were true that I am forced then everything in life is governed by force and there is no such thing as the ultimate freedom.

His mind was full of such things and he sat there a long while. He saw now no victory in his final severance of the cord. To the contrary, he saw only hopeless destruction. He had lost. Old Pete had lost. Mary had lost. Nora seemed to have been forever lost.

DESTRUCTION: it was all, it seemed, that he had ever known and ever done.

Then suddenly he knew that he must go away. That even in the short time that he had been at home, he had fallen into a habit, almost a technique of life, and was weaving about himself a web which he soon would not be able to see beyond and he would only live blindly on to certain blind death.

He knew suddenly now that what he wanted was somewhere within him, only that never had he had the courage to pay for it. To go away would be to cut through the web, to free himself for an objective responsiveness to his own existence, to see once again the most humble of realities with its unique fact of existence, thus restoring to each living thing, each object, its miraculous worth.

For what were the things that he had loved so in Boomer, and Red, and Old Gus? Yes, he realized, in three months he was almost blind to all the things that they stood for, had been to each other. The trouble with him was that he went into each situation as if the situation itself were the *cause* not the *effect* of the way he reacted, when in reality it was he that was the *cause*, the situation the *effect upon him*.

So he was becoming that which he detested most of all in humanity - inhuman, animalistic. Wasn't he like the animal, unlike the human, in that when he was placed in a particular situation he became blinded, could not think, saw only darkness, reverted only to instinct, did not in fact have the human courage to be able to think.

What had worried him since he had come home, he realized suddenly, was truly not so much (as he had thought) what he wanted to do, to accomplish in this life, but what he would have to give up in order to accomplish whatever it was - not, he thought suddenly ashamed at his own stupidity, how he treated life, but always how life was treating him.

There was only one thing now that had any hold on him and that was the fifty thousand dollars. He was certainly in no frame of mind to be accepting it or turning it down and he decided that for the present he would let Old Gus put it in the bank for him and only draw on the interest. He had his disability cheque, and his car, and his three hundred severance bonus was due any day. He would give the money from the ring to Mary. But most important he had waiting for him the shack on Dismal Key down in Florida in the Ten Thousand Islands.

Quickly he was in the car, fully aware and stomach chugging excitedly, of his own weaknesses, knowing that if he didn't get out of this town this day he might never be able to do it.

Faster than he had ever driven he drove east and stopped out on 41 where he had seen some U-Driveit trailers and rented one and driving, still faster than he had ever driven, to the Winnetka house, pulling up into the driveway and slamming on the brakes screechingly, he ran up the back stairs, nodded to the maid as he went through the kitchen, and upstairs to his room where he began packing furiously.

Mary came into the room a few moments later, sensing at once Nick's desperation: 'Nick, what's wrong? Why do you have that thing on your car? Where are you going?'

He stopped what he was doing and went over and kissed her, then went right back to packing.

'Where?' she asked. And he noticed a sense of panic in her voice.

'On a trip,' he said.

'Nick,' she said slightly choked. 'Nick, you're not coming back.'

He was throwing things into the bag furiously and he could not make himself look up at her.

'I have to go,' he said.

'Yvonne,' Mary hollered leaving the room. 'My God, Yvonne,' Nick heard her panicky voice.

From downstairs he heard Yvonne's reply, and Mary going down the stairs, and Yvonne coming up the stairs seconds later and Nick knew Mary was having herself a belt in the kitchen.

'God, Nick,' Yvonne said, 'do you have to do everything this way.'

'For Christ's sake don't you start too,' he said.

'You could have been more subtle about it,' she said.

She turned and left the room and went down the backstairs to the kitchen. Mary was on the phone talking to Old Pete.

'I tell you, Peter, he's going away for good. You know my intuition. I've never been wrong when it came to my feelings about my son.'

'I don't give a goddamn where he goes. And good riddance. The punk has done nothing but disgrace us.'

'Peter, that's a lie,' she said. 'Nick is sick. Sick from the war. I know about these things. I've read practically everything there is to read regarding our vets.'

'Yeah. Well, there were lots of other boys in the service. And they didn't act like him. How you explain that?'

'They didn't do what our Nick did. Very few boys made the contribution that our Nick made.'

Old Pete knew now that arguing with Mary wasn't going to get him any place today. Not with Nick involved.

'He'll be back, Mary,' Old Pete said in a new voice. 'I tell you he'll be back. He'll blow that fifty G's and he'll have to come back. You give him my love though. You give him my best, hear.'

'Don't you want to talk to him? Your own son. Your own flesh and blood.'

'No, goddamn it I don't want to talk to him.'

'Peter, watch your language.'

'Besides, he's no blood of mine. He's got a bad streak in him. Like your brother, that's what. Like you. And your drinkin'. Where do you think he gets his drinkin'.'

'Why, Pete, you know I haven't had a drink in months. On my God I haven't had a drink in months.'

Old Pete, hearing that one, crossed himself piously. How those Catholics lie.

‘Well, you give him my love. Tell him as a father to a son I wish him the best of everything, hear.’

‘You won’t talk to him?’

‘No.’

‘Mark my word Peter Stratton God will punish you for this.’

‘What do you Catholics know about God.’

‘You’re a senile old man. That’s what you are. Old. Old. Old.’ She said it. ‘God will punish you for this. He will,’ she said and hung up feeling already the great pang of regret for calling him old. It was the one thing, she knew that he couldn’t bear. It made him feel, like he had said that time: ‘Castrated, ready to die.’

‘Mother,’ Yvonne said.

Mary was standing by the phone fully absorbing the terrible thing that she had said to her husband who was really so very old and helpless and always meant well.

‘Are you all right, Mother?’

‘You don’t know how I love that boy. You don’t,’ she said. ‘I want to be alone, to think for a moment, Yvonne. You’ll never know how a woman feels about her children. But you will someday. Then you’ll understand what I’ve been through. Only then,’ she added dramatically.

‘He’s going back in the Army.’

‘The Army,’ Mary said crossing her hands on her breast. ‘The Army. Oh my God he isn’t.’

‘Well, where else could he go.’

‘You run right upstairs and find out where he’s going. Hurry, I feel faint.’

It was perfectly obvious to Yvonne that Mary did not feel faint and Yvonne was so on the verge of the giggle: from Mary’s very dramatic speech that she turned and went quickly up the backstairs.

And quickly Mary went over to the cupboard and from behind a box of Wheaties pulled a pint bottle of Four Roses and filled a kitchen glass up with the Four Rose: straight and in two gulps belted it.

‘Where you going, Nick?’ Yvonne asked him.

‘I haven’t made up my mind yet.’

'Here, let me help you fold those things.'

'Thanks,' he said. 'You'd think that after three years in the Army at least I'd know how to pack.'

'You do know where you're going, don't you. It's with that woman, isn't it. With Nora.'

'No. But I wish I was.'

'You love her anyhow, don't you. In spite of what she is.'

'Yes.'

'Pierro's been drinking a lot lately, Nick.'

'So.'

'Won't you tell me?'

'Honest, baby, I don't know. I really don't. I just know that I've got to get out of here as fast as I can. As far away as I can. And don't you start giving me any of that crap about running away.'

She smiled. 'I won't,' she said. Then suddenly her voice became shaky. 'Oh, Nick, I feel so sorry for you.' Then she was in his arms crying. He patted her for a while, until she stopped. 'I'm just a goddamn sentimental fool, I guess.'

'Where's Mother?'

'In the kitchen. Thinking.'

'Or drinking?' Nick asked. 'Go watch her, will you. There's no sense in her working herself up to a scene.'

'All right, Nick,' she said. 'But you will write, won't you?'

'Yes,' he said, 'I'll write.'

'You're not going to stay in the Army?'

'No.'

'I'm glad,' she said. 'I don't understand you, Nick, but I've always loved you. You know that.'

'I know it, baby,' he said in that soft tender way that he rarely displayed. 'You'll always be my little baby.'

She left and went downstairs and told Mary that Nick wasn't going into the Army. Mary sighed a great dramatic sigh of relief and then Yvonne told her that she was almost positive that Nick himself wasn't sure exactly where he was going or what he was going to do but that he promised her faithfully that he would write often.

Three hours later Nick was finished packing. It was really a very makeshift job. He just piled things into the

suitcases and trailer, all the old things that he had saved up in the attic and a lot of pots and pans that Mary had discarded in the basement, and for good measure had made a raid on the liquor room and copped two cases of scotch, one of gin, and one of bourbon. It gave him a kind of good feeling; a kind of symbolic feeling of farewell to Old Pete.

Then all packed and ready he went into the kitchen to say goodbye to Mary and Yvonne. 'Mary cried half drunken hysterically and begged Nick to go down and say goodbye to his father, after all his father meant well even if he didn't understand them. They, Nick and Mary and Yvonne were American. They had background Old Pete would never have. They must consider Old Pete's meagre background. That was the least they could do. It would show what *their* background really meant. So finally, just in order to be able to get out of the place, Nick agreed that maybe he would stop by Old Pete's. He wouldn't promise, but more than likely, he lied, he would stop.

And with that final lie he kissed the women goodbye and got into his car and started for Florida.

Chapter Thirty Four

THE first week on Marco Island, because he felt he couldn't afford the Marco Island Inn, Nick stayed at a small cabin at Larry's fishing camp out near Caxambas Pass. He explained to Larry that he had come to stay indefinitely and that he wanted his stay to be selfsustaining. The first morning they drove out to Nick's Key and Larry showed him the small shack he had built as part of the deal, then in the afternoon they fished, and after fishing went to Molly's Beer Joint where Larry and Nick sat in a corner making up a list of supplies that Nick would have to have. Then the next morning they got up and fished together, then Nick went back to the cabin and in the heat of the day wrote Gus a long letter explaining that he didn't want his

whereabouts known, and instructions and authorization for Gus to hold the fifty thousand dollars for Nick until he could make up his mind what he wanted to do with it.

Larry helped Nick get his supplies together and let him use his boat to run the supplies out to Dismal Key and promised Nick all the guiding business that he, Larry, couldn't handle. Larry's advice saved Nick considerable money but Nick nevertheless soon realized that in order to get the boat, which was essential, certainly more essential than a car, he would have to sell the car. Larry advised that he go to Miami to sell it. But advised too that he wait at least a month, until the Miami market was up due to the tourist influx - and told Nick that in the meantime he could use one of Larry's boats and an old motor if Nick would pay for having the motor put in shape.

So after one week Nick moved out to his Key. He was very proud of the Key and found it hard to believe that he really owned it. He inspected it carefully the first day, not only by boat, but by foot, and noticed how well it was building up near the south end and thought that in no time at all it would be at least another quarter mile of white sand beach. Then, because already, late in the day, he began to feel the loneliness, and the terrible lonely strangeness, he went fishing with a vengeance and got back to his shack after dark and lit his kerosene lamp and took out a book and sitting on his old Army cot, with the GI blankets on the cot, began to read. He did not read long. The mosquitoes were bad in the shack and it was too warm to get under the covers and there was a stickiness coming into the air as if it were about to rain or storm. Then he thought this was the hurricane season and how, supposing - Christ if one ever hit no one would even know what had happened to him. He walked down to the beach. The sky was clear, star filled. There was a strong wind from the gulf and out over the gulf he saw the rain squalls and looking back inland he saw more squalls and thought surely if the wind did not change abruptly he would be hit by a squall this night. He sat on the beach with the small surf growing with the impending squall, watching the thick rain clouds come rolling in from out on the gulf, thinking how strange it was for him to be here now, sitting there with the wind

coming harder, cooler to his face and the sound of the palm fronds rasping in the trees behind him growing louder, until finally he saw the rain on the water not far out and made a run for the cabin, soon was asleep in the cabin with the rain coming down hard and the air cool from the rain.

In the morning the rain was gone and the sun was up hot. He awoke sweating in the bed and feeling the itchy wetness of his three-day-old beard and went down to the beach and swam, with his spinning outfit caught two mangrove snappers near some rocks on the beach and pan-fried them there in the early morning. It had been a bad night. He had dreamed but could not remember the dream. He realized he must shave. It would be damn important to shave here. If you did not shave here you would feel dirty always.

All week he fished with a vengeance; a furiousness it was, determined to stick it out that first whole week - not to go into town, to Larry's camp even, only to deliver what fish he had taken to the fish house for freezing and to get his receipts for the fish he had brought in, payable the first and fifteenth of every month.

He fished so long and hard in the hot sun that he began after only three days to sleep well and was so tired he did not even think about Chicago or what had happened since he had come home. The last day of the first week Larry stopped to tell him he had a party to guide the next day. It was his first party guiding and he stayed up late, for him, getting the equipment he would need in perfect condition, proudly, and could even feel an excitement over his first day as a professional fishing guide.

In the early morning he picked his party up at Larry's dock. They were a man and a woman from Miami and did not know much of fishing. Nick was very patient with them. They were lucky and caught several large snook trolling and later in the day Nick tried for tarpon and they tied into two around eighty pounds but their inexperience caused them to lose them both. But at the end of the day they were so gratified they not only paid Nick his twenty dollar fee but tipped him ten dollars besides and hired him for the next day and even asked him up to the Marco

Island Inn to have a drink with them. Instead Nick went to Molly's with Larry. Everyone had already heard of Nick's luck that day. Everyone always heard of everyone else's luck. Nick had actually done better than Larry that day and many came around kidding Larry and they drank a lot of beer.

Days passed. Nick grew strong, deeply tanned, remarkably adjusted to his new life. He began to read more now, found time for other things; repair work on his shack, trips back into the Glades. His great need for continuous, long hours of fishing began to evaporate. He went often to Molly's seemingly satisfied to pass the evening there; to discuss where the day's catches had been made; to drink beer leisurely and to listen to the history of the Mangrove Coast as it had been passed down by word of mouth, completely unaware that in three short weeks he himself had become the topic of considerable conversation, that already there was a legend springing up about him.

Right before Nick was to go to Miami to sell his car Larry told him about a boat that was for sale up in Naples and Nick went up to look at it. It was exactly what he wanted; an eighteen foot skiff with a 15-horse Evinrude outboard. Larry thought it was a good buy, he knew the boat, and the owner, and Nick made a deposit. In town, the clean wealthy town, Nick decided to spend the day. He decided to splurge on a big lunch down at the Cove, one of Naples' better restaurants. In the Cove he began to drink martinis and for the first time since his first night on the Key began to feel the loneliness again. He looked around at all the wealthy people in the crowded restaurant feeling once again all that inadequacy, that left-outness that he always seemed to have. At the bar he tried to strike up several conversations but the urgency was too strong within him and the people, even the bartender, seemed to ignore him. He drove, very drunk, back to Marco, to Molly's. And very drunk was driven by Larry to one of Larry's fishing shacks where he spent the night. Next morning he went out to his Key to pick up some clothes knowing as he stood in the boat that the first thing he was going to do when he got to Miami was to try and find Nora.

He found her in mid-afternoon by the pool at the Royal Hotel. He had stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of town and put on his summer khakis (he was still not officially discharged). She was having a drink and reading *Time* magazine when he came up. He was so deeply tanned, so physically keen, at first she had wondered if it were really he. They went into the bar.

'I wish you hadn't followed me, 'Nick,' she said.

'I didn't,' he said wondering the instant he had said it if maybe he *was* actually following her. Then explained to her where he was living and what he was doing. He had come to sell his car.

'You're down to that.'

'Yes. Or up to it. I don't know which.' She had a deep tan, too, but he thought her eyes were tired. And she had lost weight. 'I guess I should have called,' he added. 'Can we have dinner?'

She hesitated but for a moment: 'I've a date, Nick,' she said. 'But I guess I can get out of it. If I can get Cindy to take it I'll be free. Where are you staying?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I was only going to be here one night. I thought I'd stay with you. You staying here at the Royal?'

'Yes.'

They could both feel it - the awkwardness. But to them it was familiar. They sat at the bar drinking. She had made up her mind (why?) to spend the evening with him, was not going to let the awkwardness destroy it. At first they talked about odd things (undoubtedly due to the awkwardness), things they usually wouldn't have spoken of: the weather, fishing, what kind of a season Miami was having now that the war was over. She didn't mention Chicago, or how hard she had been working, and finally she said,

'You know, Nick, it isn't very sensible on either of our parts. But I guess we were never born to be sensible.'

'No, I guess not.'

Then they were talking about the wedding Old Pete had thrown at the Edgewater and about how Old Pete and Lou Duck must have felt when they saw her there, and they were laughing and the awkwardness had gone away and

she had the feeling she sometimes had with him - that she wasn't, never had been, what she really was.

So they sat there drinking, then abruptly (as it always had been with them) they went up to her room. Later, on the balcony overlooking the ocean they had dinner sent up. They could hear the surf and see it coming in and all the lights of the big hotels along the strip and suddenly Nick felt the uniqueness that was America.

'You know what this country really is when you see this place. There isn't any place in the world like this.'

'I wish I had seen other places. So I would know,' she said. 'What's going to happen, Nick? To people like you and me.'

'I guess we're forced to stick together,' he said seriously. 'I mean like the poor are forced to stick together. Because they have no one else to depend on but the rest of the poor.'

'Is that the only reason?' she said. 'I don't think so. Sometimes when I'm with you I don't feel like a whore anymore. I think that's why I like to be with you.'

'You'll never be a whore to me. Don't use that word, Nora. Not on yourself.'

'But I am, nevertheless - you see we're not really very sensible,' she smiled. 'I mean you're really very destructive, Nick. You come around a whore and she doesn't want to be one anymore.'

'Stop it, will you?'

'All right.'

'I love you. You know that.'

'Yes. But that doesn't solve anything. Does it? Really?'

He paused a moment. 'No.'

'The wind is beautiful and soft and fresh tonight,' she said. 'It's that way every night, I guess. But I don't realize it - what are you going to do? When you get back?'

'The same thing. For a while.'

'No, there's something else. Isn't there?'

'Yes, there is. I've thought of it. And I must be very sure before I go ahead. But first I've got to get some things clear.'

'Well, you tell me when you want to.'

'Thanks,' he said. 'Would you like to go out?'

'Not especially.'

'Good,' he said. And reached over and poured them each a-brandy.

So, two days later, having sold his car, Nick returned to his Key. It had been a pleasant three days. It had seemed as inevitable as the sunrise and sunset of Marco that he should see Nora. And before he had left they had agreed there wasn't any reason for them not to see each other as often as it was possible for him to come over.

Chapter Thirty Five

THE high winds of the Atlantic hurricanes swept across Florida. The Glades bent westward and the Gulf of Mexico churned under grey overcast skies. There were days of no fishing in the Ten Thousand Islands and days when the sea was too heavy for Nick to even chance the journey from his Key to Marco. Two months had passed and Nick had begun to write. It was all at once the most exhilarating and terrifying time he had known in his life. Days would pass without his being seen at Molly's.

In his new found work he knew what he wanted to say, felt an heretofore unknown satisfaction when he thought he had said it on paper and his depression would be terrible when next day he would find how clumsy was his work, how it lacked true emotion. He had begun to read with a fanaticism, never for story, but always for how emotion and effect had been obtained. At times he thought himself, as Old Pete had repeatedly told him - crazy, truly going mad. He realized too, near the end of November, that his 'sketches' were in reality all but bit parts of a whole - a larger mural which was his story. The frustration of not knowing how to put it together, of knowing how clumsy was his technique, how truly terrible his construction made him feel outraged and stomach sick as he had never before known. He longed to talk to someone about his work. To show it. He did not realize it was his vanity that

prevented him from doing so. Then suddenly he had begun, from the writing, to find out some things about himself that he had never known and did not like. At the end of the first month he had become exhausted and frustrated and had gone into Molly's and gotten roaring wrathfully drunk and if it had not been for Larry would have been taken good by several of the Cracker boys.

Occasionally he wrote home by sending the letter to Nora to be mailed in Miami and had a post office box there where Nora would pick up his mail and send it on to him. He did not like reading the letters which came from Mary. They seemed to get more and more depressing. Yvonne would write occasionally but he never heard from Old Pete although Mary would always say how much Old Pete missed him and needed him. To Gus he did not feel it was necessary to write nor did he expect to hear from him.

Daily the work seemed to get better. He had unconsciously fallen into a routine whereby he was most productive. He was beginning to learn something of the value of the discipline of patience, of the practice and peace that came from moderation. In his mind he saw Nora as he had never known her before; and he was startled, severely perplexed, when in a mind's study of Old Pete he found that what he thought his father's weaknesses were in reality his greatest strengths.

The first week in December Larry brought him out a telegram which Nora had forwarded from Miami. It was an extremely rough day of periodic rain squalls and Larry and Nick had a difficult time beaching Larry's boat. The telegram was from Mary and said that Old Pete was very sick and that Nick should come home at once. Nick got into Larry's boat and they made it to Larry's camp and in spite of the windbreakers they were soaking wet. From Larry's camp Nick tried to place a call but the lines were down so Larry drove him into Naples. Nick placed the call collect and Yvonne answered and accepted the charges. Before Nick had a chance to ask about Old Pete, Yvonne informed him that it was about time he had let them know exactly where he was; it was ridiculous, smug, and childish to have his mail sent to a post office box. Then she told Nick that there wasn't anything at all wrong with Old

Pete - Mary had gotten extremely drunk and sent the telegram because she wanted to have Nick home again. Yvonne said that Old Pete was deeply hurt because he hadn't heard from Nick and went around the house all night saying: 'My son, My son, MY SON,' and was very irascible and more difficult than ever, and so disgraced by the breaking of the engagement that he wouldn't even go to church any more. Nick asked if he still went to the poker games and he and Yvonne both laughed when Yvonne said, yes, he still went to the games. Mary was drinking more and more and Yvonne said that she, herself, was trying to figure some way of getting out of the house. She also said that the theatre business was bad and Old Pete had mentioned several times that they thought they might sell out. She also said that Pierro's practice wasn't going well at all and it was rumoured that he and Marci weren't getting along. Then she asked Nick what he was doing. He said not very much, reading and fishing, and to be sure and give everyone his love, and not to worry, and to be especially sure and say hello to Old Gus. Yvonne asked him if he wanted to speak to Mary and he said, no, he thought it would be better if they didn't speak and Yvonne agreed. Then she asked him how Nora was just as if Nora was right next to him, and he told her that he hadn't seen her at all but he could tell Yvonne didn't believe him.

Nick received two more alarming telegrams from Mary during the Christmas season and neither one was valid. Painfully, painstakingly, he pursued his work. He found he could work better at night. He would work from eleven until four or five and then if he had a fishing party take them out, or fish for himself. In the afternoon he walked the beach in the sun or drove his boat back into the Glades. His book began to take shape and suddenly the monumental task of actually completing it, the way he wanted it completed, confronted him. He became depressed, so depressed that the always noncommittal, live-let-live Larry suggested he get away for a while.

He decided to go to Miami and see Nora. It had been September when he had last seen her and now it was late January, almost four months. He went into Naples and bought himself two tropical suits and several sport shirts,

the first clothes he had bought since he had come back to the States. He hadn't spent a cent of his income and had earned and saved from his guiding and fishing. He decided to splurge and take a thousand with him and rented a convertible in Naples and took off for Miami soberly.

Nora was not at the Royal. Nor at the Kings, nor at the apartment, all of which she had left as forwarding addresses. He tried several bars and clubs inquiring of her and finally realized at two in the morning he had better start looking for a room. By means of bribery he got a room at the Royal. Next morning one of the bellmen told him (by means of bribery) that he had seen her around, he thought it was at the Flame or the track. He went out to the track but she wasn't there. At the track he began to drink. He made a forty dollar bet on a five to one shot and the horse came in. At the clubhouse bar he struck up a conversation with a longlegged, finely breasted red-head, who was married - the wife of a Cleveland undertaker; thirty-three, green-eyed, ripe. They left the track together. And, later, around six, in her room at the Yale Plaza she had asked him if he didn't want to join her in Havana to see the freak shows. He said he would have to go back to his hotel to change for dinner and would pick her up around eight, then called to tell her he couldn't make it. Premeditatively he had called, hadn't stood her up, wanted to have it available, knowing surely she wouldn't be available long and thinking he was a damn fool for letting it go.

That night he started to hit the place looking for Nora. He started a little after ten. It was a fine, starfilled night with a soft wind from the sea and clouds out over the sea. At first he didn't drink much, but soon he was drinking in almost every place he went. He hit the Flame around two in the morning. The dice girl knew Nora and after feeling out Nick thoroughly told him a place where she might be found later on - a small bar in an apartment house at the north end of the beach. Nick went there around three in the morning. The place was filled with an assortment of characters: pimps, lesbians, jockeys, whores, suckers. There was a piano player behind the bar and a girl singer strolling behind the bar. Nick had several drinks, waiting. About five she walked in. At first he couldn't believe it was she.

She was so pale and thin and overly made up. Her eyes were half-shut and yellowish and she swayed slightly as she walked by him up two places to the bar. He walked around to where she stood:

'Nora,' he said.

She turned around, her eyes slowly focusing on him. She was on something now, he was sure, and drunk besides.

'Nick,' she said. 'Little Nickie.' Then nastily: 'What the hell you want little boy.'

'Nora, what's happened?' he asked. Then realized how stupid it must have sounded. 'Let me buy you a drink. What are you drinking?'

'Beat it,' she said.

'Like hell I will,' he said. She was not clean, he could see, and her pancake was caked unevenly.

'You heard the lady,' a voice said next to Nick. He glanced around at a tall thin weakmouthed man. He looked him up and down. He had on brown suede shoes and dark brown gabardine pants and shirt to match. The shirt was a sport shirt but buttoned and where the tie should have been was a little emerald horseshoe. Nick turned back to Nora.

'What are you drinking?' he asked and felt a hand on his shoulder.

'Leave him alone, Steve,' Nora said. 'I know him.'

'You heard the lady,' Steve said.

'Leave him alone, you goddamn pimp sonofabitch,' Nora said drunkenly and incoherently to Steve.

Quickly Steve stepped around and struck her hard on the side of the face. Nick didn't hesitate. He took a heavy ashtray from the bar and holding it in his right hand smashed into the side of the pimp's head hard as he could. Blood spurted at once and the pimp was on the floor looking up at him dazedly, blood streaming and the bartender was over the top of the bar. Nick stepped back and around and took a twenty from his pocket and gave it to the bartender and grabbed Nora's arm and half dragged her from the place. Fortunately there was a cab unloading passengers when they came out. They took it and when they were about five blocks away they could hear sirens.

'Nick,' she screamed finally. 'Nick,' she screamed. He

put his hand over her mouth. 'You killed him,' she blurted. He covered her mouth up again shaking his head. Soon she began to shake her head too, reassuring herself he had not killed, and he released his hand but she continued to shake her head reassuringly, then began to mutter about having a drink.

Nick stopped at a bar just off Collins in a crowded district and dismissed the cab and took Nora, still obviously on the verge of hysteria, inside. Silently she drank six double shots, then he got another cab and took her back to his hotel. He called the house physician and he gave her a hypo (Nick gave her several more shots while they were waiting for him) and she finally went to sleep.

He stayed up until almost eight o'clock, then went to sleep too. Around noon he awoke. She was still sleeping. He ordered breakfast. As he was eating she began to twist and turn and sweat in the bed. At first he thought it was a nightmare, then knew better. At four she awoke very sick. He called the doctor and he gave her another shot and while the shot was taking hold Nick managed to get some split-pea soup down her. At midnight she awoke again.

'I've got to get out of here,' she said. 'Now.' She was desperate he could tell.

'What are you on?' he asked her.

'What business is it of yours?' she said nastily, hatefully.

'You're not going anywhere,' he said.

'Where are my clothes?'

'Being cleaned,' he said. 'They were filthy.'

'You bastard. You rotten bastard.'

'I'll get the doctor.'

'The doctor can't help me,' she said. Then screamed: 'I've got to get out of here.'

Nick slapped her and she began to cry, then he called the doctor again. After she went to sleep Nick went downstairs and had a drink in the bar with the doctor. He explained who he was and what his suspicions about Nora were and that he would like to take her with him. The doctor was from Chicago originally and knew of Old Pete Stratton and was very co-operative and gave Nick several prescriptions for nembutal and told him to be sure see another doctor when they got to where they were going

and what to expect when Nora began to dump her habit.

As soon as she got up in the morning Nick made her take two of the nembutal. He had his things packed and put into his rented convertible. Then he helped her to get dressed and supporting her took her down to the car and they started the drive to Marco.

For a while she slept, then she would begin to twist and turn and sweat in her sleep as if having some horrible nightmare. He would stop and wake her and give her one of the nembutal, then drive on. Once she slept so soundly that he had become frightened and stopped again to shake her awake. Near Everglades City he tried to talk her into eating something but she refused. So he drove on into Caxambas Pass where his boat was docked at Larry's and with Larry's help put her carefully in the boat and started for the Key. Larry never said a word except 'Glad to see you back, youngin'.'

The next week was a nightmare. Twice Nick had to send for the doctor from the mainland. Nora swore at Nick incessantly and loathingly. Once when he had come back to the shack from getting water she had tried to knife him as he bathed her forehead. He realized she was not only dangerous but so depressed she might be suicidal and he hid everything potentially dangerous to her.

She begged Nick to get her some 'stuff'. She would twist and turn and sweat on the bed then stiffen out, retch, fall on the floor, scream. Her body would jerk convulsively. Several times she had run and thrown herself headfirst into the wall. When she had quieted down Nick would lead her down to the beach, out into the sun. Once, on the beach, between tremens, she had asked him in a bewildered yet somehow almost euphoric way: 'Why did you bring me here?' And he had answered: 'You'd have brought me, wouldn't you?' And she had changed suddenly, bitten her lip, and glared at him. 'Like hell I would,' with twisted lips, hateful mouth. And in that moment Nick realized, no, she wouldn't have done the same for him. The strange thing was it didn't come as a shock. In a way he had known all the time she wouldn't have.

Ten days passed and suddenly she fell into a deep sleep. She slept for almost thirty-six hours. When she awoke he

fed her some canned chicken soup in the bed. When she was done she smiled up at him a weak, childish smile and shakily took his hand. 'I guess I kicked it,' she said. 'Thanks, Nick.' Then she slept again. He covered her and wrote a note that he was going into town to get some things, then for the first time in almost two weeks he left his Key. When he came back, exhausted, he crawled in next to her and when he awoke next day she wasn't there. He found her on the beach, wading, wearing the dungarees he had brought her and one of his shirts.

'You watch yourself in those shallows,' he hollered to her. 'There's sting rays half buried in the sand.'

'Knee deep in the water, she looked at him startled, then ran for the shore. He began to laugh.

'You were kidding,' she said when she got near him.

'No,' he said.

'I'm famished,' she said.

'I'll bet you are. Let's go up and make some bacon and eggs.'

'Pounds of bacon,' she said. 'I look like hell don't I.'

'You've been through a lot.'

'It's beautiful here.'

'Yes. Come on, we'll feed you.' He took her hand and they began to walk towards the shack.

Her appetite was a false one but she managed two strips of bacon and half an egg.

The next few days he spent showing her the islands and the Glades. He did not take her to Larry's or to Marco, however. He explained to her what he had been doing and about his book. She seemed strangely fascinated, as he had first been, with the Mangrove Keys. And became almost little-girl excited every time she got a fish on but seemed little impressed that he was writing a book. She began to tan and fill out. He had wanted to ask her how she had gotten on dope. He did not want to ask her this for personal reasons but more out of curiosity. But he thought it better to wait until she told him. Finally she did. It had happened easily, she said. She had tried it (sniffing heroin), drunk, one night with Steve, and taken to it as she took to everything, with an abandon. After that, for her, it had all been downgrade. Steve had spent all the money she had

acquired betting at the track and she had been reduced to giving exhibitions promoted by her pimp. At times, when the urge returned, when she became nervous and irritable, she would deliver vengeful tirades on what she would do to him if she ever got back to Miami.

Nick began to guide and fish again. When he fished commercially he would take her with him. And he had resumed his writing. Occasionally they went into Molly's. Nora and Old Molly got along famously from the beginning. Nora promised Nick she wouldn't drink anything but beer until she felt considerably better and her desire for the narcotic decreased. Nick very seldom drank much himself, was always kind and considerate to her. She read on the beach and took the sun and fished in the surf. About twice a week they would take the boat and go into Naples to a movie and once in a while to The Cove for a drink. One night, in The Cove, with the wealth of Naples about them, he noticed Nora's obvious envy and next time they went into Naples he suggested they go right home but she said, no, she wanted to go to The Cove and was insistent. Several times during the next month, when she would become irritable, she would cunningly say how well she felt and thought it would be a good idea if she went into Naples just to browse the shops. When Nick refused she would become very argumentative.

They made much love, but not the love of before, and talked of many things as they walked the beach together. They both knew that it couldn't, wouldn't last. They must go their separate ways. The islands, Nick had come to realize, were not a place he would always live on but a place that now served his purpose. And Nora was often bored. She tried hard. She knew this was her final chance - that if she failed now death was her only answer. She began to admire Nick - his doggedness, the way he worked, how much better his work was getting.

The first week in March it began to grow hot. They were sitting on the beach in the early evening, very close to the water, so that the breeze blew the mosquitos away.

'I think I'll be getting on soon,' she said to him.

'Yes, I think you should,' he said. 'It shouldn't be long.'

'I've enjoyed this. And I'm grateful.'

He was silent.

'Do you suppose anyone in Chicago would believe what we've done the last few months?' she said.

'No,' he said. 'Certainly not Old Pete. Or Pierro. Mary would believe it.'

'Marci would like this, I think,' Nora said.

'Yes, I think she would. I wonder how they're getting along.'

'I've wondered that, too. Even before I came here with you. I thought about it several times. In Miami.'

'I wouldn't think you would have.'

'I wonder if I'll make it this time,' Nora said.

'You didn't kill him - your husband.'

'No. But - let's not talk about that,' she said. 'I know you'll make it, Nick. I'm very proud of that.'

'I haven't made it yet. The reason I came to Miami when I did was because I was so depressed I was thinking of killing myself.'

'You?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because I didn't think I'd have courage to finish. And when I'm finished how do I know it will be any good.'

'It's good,' she said. 'I've read some of it and it's good.'

'That's kind of you.' He wondered suddenly if maybe she, too, wasn't, inside, laughing at him. As he knew Old Pete and Pierro would be laughing at him if they knew what he was attempting to do.

'Let's go in,' he said, ordering.

'All right, Nick,' she said.

And she felt his arm go around her back up under her arm onto her breast as they walked towards the shack. And again he wondered if she was laughing at him. All of them. He took his arm from her. And when he got back to the shack did not want her but sat on the edge of *his* cot seeing in his mind's eye a huge panoramic picture of her and Old Pete and Pierro all laughing at him. Then she came over to him and the picture went away.

Later, Nick could not sleep. He got up and walked out onto the beach. Off shore he could hear fish working. It sounded, from the great noise in the night, like sharks in a

school of mullet. He walked far up the beach thinking about his childhood and what had happened since he had come home. He wondered if it had been 'fair' of him leaving like he had, breaking his engagement to Pat when so many were counting on him, but most of all if he would ever be able to finish his book.

Chapter Thirty Six

THE following day Nick received a letter from Old Gus. He had picked it up at Larry's in the morning and carried it with him all day unopened. Towards evening, after he had swum in the sea, and he was clean of the sweat of day, and the sun was low in the west he sat upon a piece of driftwood on the beach and opened the letter. The letter was written in simple Greek.

Nickie mou -

I write to you with the sadness of my old heart and for the sadness of yours. Your beloved cousin Pierro has taken his life by his own hand.

It was decided by a council of our family that for a while you should not know. Why, I cannot say. Perhaps because already from his death they have somehow understood the similarity of your ways. But I must tell you. For there are things in this life we cannot avoid.

Maybe you knew, maybe not, Nickie mou, but things for him were not well. For over a month now he has lived separate from his wife. And she with child. How she came to be with child I do not know. For this he wished to avoid. But she was with child. And from the time he knew of it until his death he drank much. And the devil of jealousy was strong with him. Only for the sake of the child, I know, upon advice of the physician, did she leave him.

His work was bad. Your father did not live up

to his promised obligations to him. I do not think he ever told her of the disease of his family. And this was strong and heavy upon his sensitive soul. Too, maybe, I am not sure, Nickie mou, but maybe he did not believe she returned his love because maybe it was he that married for reasons other than love. If this is so then the burden was heavy indeed. For his life was of devotion to truth, Truth through the work that was his life. So if there was an untruth in his life it too must have weighed strong and heavy upon his sensitive soul.

• We cannot say what makes men do as they do for what is in my heart is my dream and my tear, and in your heart your dream and your tear, and to know what is in the other's heart you must pay for each dream and each tear and that is not the way of this world. God Bless You, Nickie mou, and hold up thy head always,

Lovingly,
Old Gus

Nick sat on the driftwood for a long while and finally he heard Nora calling him as she came from the shack. He put the letter in his pocket and stood up and watched her come across the white sand, her feet half buried in the soft sand. She stopped close to him.

'I've never left you alone at night,' he said. 'Would you be all right for a while.'

'Something's terribly wrong. I can feel it.'

'Would it be all right?'

'Nick, what's wrong. I don't want to stay there. Alone.'

'All right,' Nick said. 'Come with me. We'll eat in Naples. Pierro killed himself two days ago.'

'Pier - ,' she gasped, her hand to her mouth.

'Come in,' he said gruffly. 'I want to talk to Yvonne.'

They ran up the coast to Naples and Nick placed the call, person to person to Yvonne collect. He heard her voice say 'I'll take it upstairs' and waited.

'Nick,' she blurted. 'Oh Nick,' she was crying. 'Oh God Nick, it's terrible.'

'Can I make the funeral?'

'It was this afternoon. They didn't even have the casket open. His whole head was gone.'

'Mother?'

'Under sedation. They didn't even tell his *own* mother, the animals,' she half-screamed, half-sobbed. 'And the police. Oh God, Nick, he tried to kill himself with a razor. But he couldn't, couldn't because he was afraid if he didn't do it he'd never be able to draw - *Nick, Nick* -'

'You want me to come up?' he asked. 'I can come, baby,' he said.

'Don't Nick. Don't ever come here. Please. Please - don't,' she paused. 'Wait a minute. One minute.'

He heard her call, 'Ellen, bring me my drink.' Then in a moment: 'I'm all right. I'm sorry, Nick,' she said not crying anymore but a slight quiver to her voice. 'But it's been such a mess. Old Pete ran out on everything. I mean he was at the funeral and all but I don't know where he is now. And *they* decided they weren't going to let Pierro's mother know. And the police. Marci's the only one with any god-damn stomach -.' Then she was crying again and Ellen took the phone.

'I'll write her,' Nick said to Ellen. 'Tell her I'll write. And to come down here if she wants to get away. Tell her I'll send her the money to come down, will you.'

'I'll tell her,' Ellen said coolly. 'Don't worry, Nick, I'll tell her,' she said. 'Goodbye, Nick.'

'Goodbye, Ellen,' he said. And hung up and went back to his booth. Nora was drinking a double martini. As he sat down he stared at the martini.

'I think I'm ready to have a drink now, don't you, Nick,' she said guiltily and uncomfortably.

'No I don't. And I don't give a shit,' he said. And after waiting two hours for her to get thoroughly saturated he half carried her from the place and took a cab down to the dock and put her in the boat and started for the Key.

After that night her drinking was periodical. He began to work with an intensity he had never known before; yet he strictly adhered to the schedule whereby he was most pro-

ductive. As the book occupied more and more of his mind's time his desire for her decreased as if in proportion. And he did not realize the effect it was having upon her.

Often he wished she would leave, go away. At times when they were fishing she would begin to talk animatedly about irrelevant subjects and usually when he was concentrating on something that was important to his work. He didn't seem to have the heart to tell her to be quiet; but she felt, from the sudden almost furious way he would begin to fish and move the boat about, that she had said something that was silly or stupid or wrong. When they would go into Naples and she would drink she would almost always become maudlin, often border on the verge of genuine hysteria. She would holler at him: 'You're going to leave me and I'm going to die.' 'You hate me, don't you, Nick.' 'You don't love me.' 'You've got what you want now you're like all the rest. Just like the rest.' Then, next day, she would apologize.

But he couldn't really let her go. She was not ready to go, he knew. She was his responsibility, he felt. One night in mid-April she stole his boat. Larry had seen her drunk at Molly's and asked her where Nick was, then came out to pick Nick up. After that Nick had to take the plugs from the boat at night.

Several days after that incident Nick had sent half his manuscript to an old Army friend in New York and asked him to get a publisher's opinion. The Army friend was himself a part time critic for *The New Yorker* and had been with the public relations unit of Nick's outfit. After Nick had mailed off the script he had gone out with Nora and gotten drunk. They stayed half drunk for four days and things were almost as they had been once back in Chicago.

When Nora sobered up she was severely depressed for several days. Twice she had even refused to go fishing with Nick. During her reflections on the beach, while Nick was away, she began to realize that the way she really liked Nick, wanted him, was the way he had been when they were drinking, living in that frenetic way. When he came home that night she asked to speak to him. They were on the beach.

'Nick, I think it's time I left,' she said.

He studied her for a moment. He was edgy, she could tell.

'Can you cut it,' he said. He had not shaved since he had been drinking and it was warm in the early evening, and his body still hot from the hot afternoon sun, and perspiration on his beard.

'I - I think so,' she said.

'You lie,' he said.

'No, I think I can.'

'Where will you go?' he asked. He seemed so self-assured now, she thought. She hated him when he was like this. He had never been like this. It was as if he had left her standing still, had gone away.

'Miami, I suppose,' she said. 'I could get a job. I've a good friend that has a restaurant. He'd give me a job as a hostess or something.'

She was sitting on the driftwood which was their favourite spot and he was standing over her smoking, bare feet in the sand. He just stared at her.

'I could get married.'

'Yeah,' he said as if preoccupied.

'Yes, goddamn it, I could. There were lots of men that wanted to marry me. That knew what I was and still wanted to marry me.'

'They know you were a junkie?'

'Sometimes you're rotten.'

'Maybe. But don't you think we ought to look at this straight.'

'You know I can get a man, Nick.'

'What good will it do if it makes you sick again.'

She was silent.

'Look,' Nick said, 'we should hear about the book soon. If they take the book we can go away together. We can try and make something for ourselves. Why don't you wait until we hear.'

'You don't want me, Nick. You're sorry for me. And I couldn't live with you knowing that.'

'Maybe, soon, I won't have to be sorry for you any more. What do you say? Will you stay?'

She was silent again, staring at the sand now in the half

light left by the already departed sun. He gave her a cigarette.

'I'll stay,' she said exhaling.

'How about a movie? There's a war picture on in Naples.'

'All right,' she said.

'And only two drinks afterwards,' he smiled.

She looked up at him. It was a little difficult to see his dark tanned face now in the half dark but she could tell he was smiling and she smiled too.

'Only two,' she said.

The next two weeks Nick was very irascible waiting to hear from New York. He had taken a job guiding on one of the big boats that had pulled into Naples from Tampa to fish the Glades. Nora had their boat all to herself and spent a lot of time in Naples, going one afternoon over to the Hotel and picking up a 'trick' which she milked for over three hundred dollars without Nick's knowledge, the proceeds of which she used to buy clothes in the smarter shops of Naples, leaving them there with a 'Will Call'.

Nick's tour with the Tampa yacht ended profitably, then because of the extreme heat there were few parties and the fish were only hitting in the early morning and late afternoon. But it was spring in the Glades and life was abounding. The fish were fat in the belly with their roe and the mating call of the birds could be heard in the day, and one day Nick saw the rare sight of two porpoises mating. Yet he was edgy with the extra time on his hands. Each morning when he had come back from fishing, before he even ate, he would take Nora in the boat and they would go into Larry's to see if the letter had come from New York.

Finally, it came. Indeed, Nick's friend said, he had a book and one of New York's oldest established publishing houses would publish it if it continued on along the lines Nick had mentioned and did not fall apart.

Strangely, he did not celebrate. He seemed completely overwhelmed. In fact from the way he shook when he first had read the letter Nora had thought positively he had been refused, and later she had hated herself because she knew the instant he opened the letter that a refusal was

what she had been hoping for and she wondered what was wrong with her, what kind of a devil she must have inside.

A week after the letter came Nick had to go into Marco for supplies. When he came back, about three of a cloudless hot naked sunny afternoon, she was in the shack, under the mosquito netting; nude, smoking.

'I've got to go into Naples,' he said. 'To the library. I should be back a little after dark,' he said.

'Take me with you,' she said.

'I'm only going to pick up a book. I'll be right back.'

'What's going to happen after the book's published.'

'It's not published yet.'

'Do you have to be so goddamn staid.'

'That's a good one.'

'Christ, you wouldn't know. You're too damn carried away,' she said. She was looking over at him now and ran one hand from her neck down over her body, over her leg. 'Do you think I've a nice body.'

He studied her, slightly angered now, angered for wanting her suddenly now in the heat of this day.

'You know I do,' he said. Then looked the other way.

'You know why I want to go with you. I'll tell you why. I want some ice. That's why. I need to be cooled off, that's why.'

He was thumbing through some notes now.

'Ice, Nickie,' she said.

'Why don't you take a swim,' he said without any trace of sarcasm.

'Maybe I will,' she said. 'Maybe after you're gone I will.'

He turned around and looked at her. 'I'll bring back some ice. And some Coke. And maybe a bottle of rum. You're right. It's damn hot - I'll be back quick as I can.'

'Kiss me, Nick.'

'I've never left without kissing you.'

'I know it,' she smiled. But there was hurt in the smile and for a second he thought he should ask her to go with him, then he pushed away the mosquito netting and sat down on the edge of the bed and kissed her. 'Hurry back,' she said. And he left.

She lay there, still for a long while, then got up and put

her bathing suit on and walked down the beach, mumbling to herself.

You leave it in the hands of God - God's Hands, Hands of God, she mumbled.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost.

The tide is coming in and if you cut the tide out about for a mile, and do another mile edging slightly in, you can get off the point of Sand Beach off Caxambas Pass and drift in with the tide. If you can't there are several sand bars not far from here and with the tide low now you could stop and rest and if you cannot - then it is all in the hands of God.

She knelt in the sand and crossed herself, knowing for a second what a picture she made, and thinking how much more there was to this than to any movie she had ever seen, then she said the 'Our Father' out loud, then three 'Hail Mary's and mumbling 'God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost', walked down into the sea she was afraid of and began to swim.

The search lasted two weeks but no trace of her was ever found. A motel owner on the highway south of Naples reported a woman of her exact description checking out with a man early next morning. There were no license plates registered in Ohio as was on the registration card and no man by the registered man's name in Lima. The F.B.I. came out and questioned Nick. There were rumours in Marco about what might have happened to her but no body was ever recovered and the Coast Guard checking on the tides were positive that if she had drowned her body would have to have been washed ashore by now unless carried out by one of those rare undercurrents or, perhaps, it had been washed ashore on some desolate Key and been devoured by turkey vultures. But the body was never found.

Chapter Thirty Seven

NICK had taken a very active part in the search; but his heart wasn't in it. Somehow he couldn't believe she was really dead. Perhaps, if he had actually seen the body, he might *almost* have been able to believe it. But he couldn't. He, probably more than anyone, he told himself, was aware of her extreme cunning - but somehow her being dead just wasn't acceptable to him.

After two weeks of combing the Keys he took off for Miami. He exhaustively searched all the places where he thought she might be, and notified the police, and finally went back to Marco. For weeks he could not work thinking about her. And during those weeks his attitude changed, his acceptance of her death became a reality.

Again it seemed to him that he was the destroyer - that all his life everything he had ever done had only ended in destruction. He thought, at times, that certainly it was his fault - if he had taken her into Naples with him that evening it never would have happened. Twice, Twice, he would rage to himself, Twice in one month, people I have loved have died because of me.

Then he began to delve into it deeper. There had been enough destruction in his life and his own could offer no possible salvation. He wondered if Nora's own death weren't a kind of ancient masochism - the tenet of the early Christian to endure suffering in the interest of eternal salvation, and at the same time making herself, as humans will, be punished for the sins they *believed* they have committed. Was that it, he wondered? Or was it something that was greater than that - that she had found a dignity and salvation, personal and on this earth, in believing she could only be of detriment to him. And had taken her life, not only in atonement, but out of a greater love and respect for his own life. It was a new thought to him, and he went back to work, but possessed of the new thought.

Work was now not only a pleasure but a salvation, perhaps even an escape, he realized. But a month and a half later he was finished, the manuscript shipped off. He made another trip to Miama hitting once again all of Nora's old haunts, vaguely hoping she might, by some miracle, still be alive. Then he returned to Marco and began to write short pieces about the islands and the people of the islands. In May the galleys came, and in mid-June he received a letter from Old Gus saying that Marci had given birth to a perfectly normal man-child. And, finally, in the heat of late August the first advance editions of his book arrived. Proudly he took one of the books into Larry's camp to show him:

Larry, after examining it carefully, said: 'Come on, youngin', we're going into Molly's. I'm gonna show this book off.'

'Larry,' Nick started.

'Crap,' Larry said, 'I suffered enough this last year. Lot of people laughin' at you about that book. It damn near cost me a few fights.'

So they went into Molly's. The word of the book spread quickly around the island and by five in the afternoon the place was crowded, everyone congratulating Nick, and examining the book, and drinking to its success. It was as if, now, they all had an interest in it.

Around eleven Nick and Larry left and went back to one of Larry's fishing shacks and Larry got out a jug of real moonshine he had been saving. They put the moonshine on the floor between them and began to drink and talk.

'Well,' Larry said, 'I suppose you'll be moving on' soon.'

'I guess so,' Nick said. 'I mean I think I'll go home. I really feel like I should.'

'I think it would do you good. Maybe this time you won't strangle yourself.'

'Maybe,' Nick said.

'Well, luck, youngin'. We've had some good fun this last year.'

'I've learned a lot here.'

'There's just as much here as anywhere. I mean wherever there's humans, families, everything's there.'

'That's something I think I've overlooked,' Nick said.

'A family?'

'Yes. I think I'd like a family.'

'That's normal, ain't it.'

'Well, it's a funny time. Everyone I know seems burdened by one.'

'Well, I don't know what for,' Larry said.

'I wish we had some of the innocence of your people up there.'

'What do you say we go get us a tarpon. Right now.'

'Let's,' Nick said. 'There's a good moon. And we haven't fished together in a long time.'

And they got up and started to put on their mosquito repellent and get their gear in order. It was one in the morning when they shoved off from the dock. Going out to the tarpon spot, Larry asked, 'You think you'll be coming back?'

'I'll be back,' Nick said. 'But not for a while. I want to write of you people and I think I can do it better when I'm away. I mean see it better.'

'Maybe you're right. Well, what will we bet on the tarpon,' Larry said. 'Let's make this a good bet.'

'A salt water reel,' Nick said.

'That's a bet, youngin', I can use a new reel.'

And fifteen minutes later they stood in the boat casting in the night.

So the second week in September Nick, after having made one final search of Miami, started home in a new Ford convertible. He drove leisurely, stopping at places of interest, and when he arrived in Chicago he went to a hotel and once again searched the places in Chicago for Nora. But no one had seen her and Hy, at the Four Winds, had heard she was dead.

It was crisp, cool, early fall weather in the midwest and the third day late in the afternoon he drove out to see Old Gus. There were tears in the old man's eyes when he saw Nick and he tenderly fondled the book Nick had brought him.

Old Gus told him the news, how Old Pete had sold out his interest in Interstate the month before and then found

out that the Stratos brothers had planned to get rid of him, and how Old Pete had gone up to the office with a loaded pistol and threatened to kill Charlie Stratos if he didn't make amends for selling Old Pete out. And of how Charlie Stratos had given in, offered even to let Old Pete buy back not only his own stock but some of theirs but Old Pete was through with them and settled for an additional one hundred and seventy-five thousand and goddamn good riddance, he had said. Then Old Gus had told Nick, at Nick's request, all the details of Pierro's suicide and how Old Pete had taken over, practically, Marci's son which had been named Peter in Old Pete's honour.

Then told Nick how much Mary had missed him, and Yvonne too, though Yvonne hardly ever said a word. Then the Old Man asked,

'And you are going home now?'

'Yes,' Nick said. 'As soon as I have a glass of wine with you.'

'And will you stay?'

'No, I don't think I will stay, Gus. It would not be good for them. Or for me. I have things I must do, too.'

'Yes. I think you are right,' Gus said pouring the wine. Then: 'God bless you, Nickie mou.'

'And God bless you,' Nick said. And they drank up and Nick went over and kissed the old man on the side of the cheek and said, 'I will come to see you. Soon.'

'As you wish, Nickie.'

So he drove home.

Yvonne and Mary both cried when they saw him. Marci was there with her baby and had kissed him affectionately. Old Pete didn't have much to say until he saw the book then he cried too and asked Nick a lot of questions about the publishing business and was there any money in books. Nick couldn't get over how very much a Stratton was the baby and held it for a while.

But he only stayed a week. He was going on to New York for the publication of the book. But some day soon, he said, he would be back.

And his mother and his brethren came, and standing outside, they sent to him, calling him. Now a crowd was sitting

about him, and they said to him, 'Behold thy mother and thy brethren are outside, seeking thee.' And he answered and said to them, 'Who are my mother and my brethren?' And looking around on those who were sitting about him, he said, 'Behold my mother and my brethren. For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.'

. Mark III: 31 to 35.

